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"OF COURSE, I SHALL SEE YOU AGAIN TO-NIGHT. I REALLY MUST, YOU KNOW."

Frontispiece—Page 165

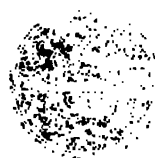
THE KIMONO

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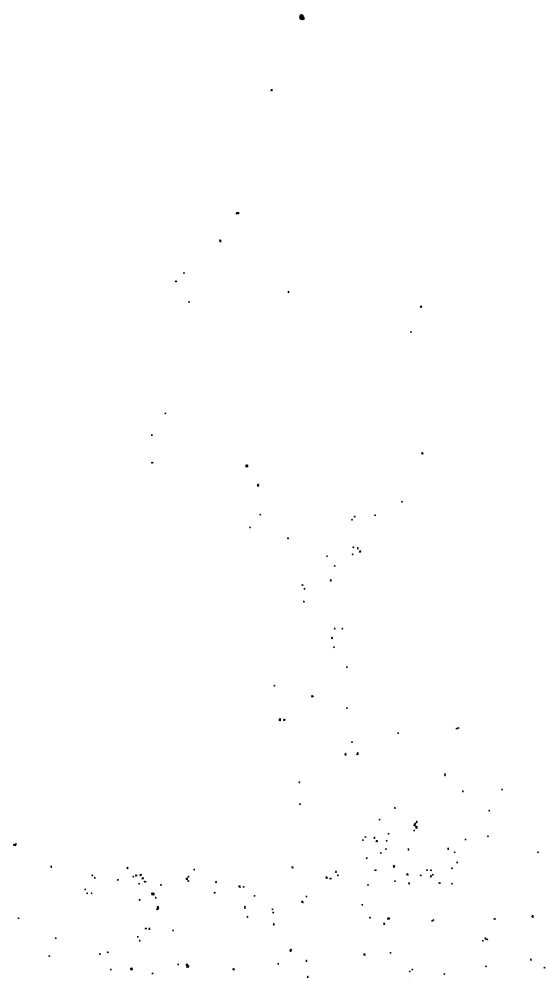
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THE KIMONO
BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE KIMONO"

W. DILLINGHAM, TUPING
NEW YORK



THE FAMILY

A STORY OF FORGIVENESS

FROM THE PLAY OF
ROBERT HOBART DAVIS

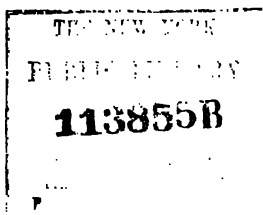
BY
EDWARD MARSHALL



ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
SCENES IN THE PLAY

G. W. DILLINGHAM COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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The Family

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FOREWORD

Most of our impressions that last come to us by accident. We may not appreciate them at the moment of their occurrence, but subsequently they creep into our lives again and perpetuate themselves. The earliest recollection I have of my own mother is linked with the word FORGIVENESS. I cannot recall the particular offense that occasioned it, but the fact remained that I received pardon—pardon at a moment when I was in a state of mind receptive enough to appreciate it. While the event served to heighten my sense of guilt, it served also to introduce the magnificence of kindness, toleration and gentle motherhood.

She stood singularly apart from everything else in my recollection, the most uncomplaining, patient, thoughtful creature endowed with life. I doubt if among all the women in the world a more unselfish mother ever lived. Surely her patience must have been sorely tried by her children. There were four of us, with twenty years difference between the eldest and the youngest son.

And in the interval there were grandchildren, plenty of them, who made a mother of her until she left us all. If among them there is one who has not been made a better man or woman because of her existence and her association with their childhood, I know not where they are.

* * *

In the years 1896 and '97 I was on the night shift of a New York newspaper in what is now known as the Tenderloin, otherwise the 19th police precinct. There the underworld of Manhattan boils over 365 times a year between darkness and dawn, and in that sordid empire evil is enthroned. The station blotters contain only the bare records of each particular offense against law and order, but nothing of the primary causes at the bottom of things. I made some discoveries there—made them quite by accident. One night a dance hall was raided, and among the prisoners was a young woman who developed hysteria the moment she came into the presence of the police sergeant. She managed to explain, inco-

herently, that she was present quite by accident; that her escort took her there to see the sights and deserted her upon the arrival of the police.

"It looks fishy to me," remarked the sergeant, "but I'll stand for it this time if you'll go home and keep out of the district in future. Where do you live, anyhow?"

The girl, having nothing to conceal, told her address. A reporter standing near made a note of it. Instantly the young woman realized the consequences of publicity.

"Don't put it in the papers, please. My mother will see it and she'll beat me to death. I can't make her believe. She will never forgive me."

* * *

The story was not printed in the papers. Instead, the girl was put on a street car and went home alone, declining an escort. Not a man present in that station doubted her story. The sergeant himself said he understood the case and held forth until the dawn telling stories of the various first offenders he had known who were drawn into the whirlpool because they hadn't the courage to confess their mistake or a mother who would forgive. I saw much of it myself afterward. Whose is the fault that such terror is implanted in the breast of a girl? Surely not her own.

I have witnessed many times the spectacle of a young man arrested for his first spree imploring the police not to let his father hear of it. But occasionally a boy can be induced to go home and make a clean breast of it. Not so with girls. They become panic-stricken, and if by chance they are really guilty they turn their backs on the only haven left them and are engulfed in the tide that sweeps onward to oblivion.

If the weak could be assured of forgiveness there would be less sin. Admitting that a large percentage of wayward girls and boys would spurn forgiveness and good advice, the possibility of even a fraction being saved justifies the experiment at the hands of parents.

* * *

When Madeline, the unhappy heroine in the Springfield Hotel, confesses, she asks the same question that has come, alas! too often to many a young woman's lips: "Where can I go now?" And the mother, if her heart is in the right kind of a breast, will respond, as does Mary Sneed: "Now you can come HOME."

That is what my mother would have done, and that is why "The Family" is dedicated to her.

R. H. D.

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THE CAST OF
"THE FAMILY" AS PRESENTED AT THE
COMEDY THEATRE, NEW YORK

JOHN SNEED	Samuel Edwards
DAVID SNEED	. . . . .	John Westley
MARY SNEED	. . . . .	Mabel Bert
MADELINE SNEED	. . . . .	Julie Herne
RUTH SNEED	. . . . .	Zyllah Inez Shannon
ROOSEVELT	. . . . .	David's Dog

Time: The present.

THE FAMILY

CHAPTER I

THE Sneed family was at Sunday morning breakfast.

"Going to church, dad?" asked David, grinning with appreciation of the joke in the suggestion. He looked around the corner of a highly colored comic supplement, which, after he had finished with the sporting section of the Sunday newspaper, always was the only portion of the sheet to interest him.

"Church?" said John Sneed, in mild surprise. "I *never* go to church. I——"

"Didn't know but the new starter at the Presbyterian track might coax you to the post. They say he's been some record-breaker up in Haverhill—preaching against racing."

Sneed was aroused by this to sententious emphasis: "Any man who will attack the noblest sport there is will have to get along without me in his congregations," he declared sententiously.

Ruth, a pretty child, half busy muttering the Sunday-school lesson printed on a leaflet which lay be-



side her plate, and which she scanned from time to time, laughed with free sarcasm. It was plain that reverence for parents was not a part of the Sneed family creed. "How *could* he get on without *you*, pa?"

"Hush, Ruth," said Madeline, her elder sister, a girl of twenty-one, who, as her mother went back and forth between the kitchen and the table, renewing, frequently, the supply of buckwheat cakes, presided at the coffee-pot.

But John Sneed had not been offended by his irreverent little daughter.

"Ruth's all right, Madeline," said he. "Let her get her lesson."

"Whoever's going to church had better hurry," Madeline commented, looking at the clock. Her mother entered at the moment. "You going, mother?"

"I didn't get the ironing all done, last night," said Mrs. Sneed. "There's a shirt that David wants——"

"Ain't that ironed?" David quickly, and not too gently, asked. "I got to have it——"

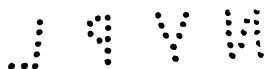
"I'll have it for you."

"I'd be in fine shape if you didn't—Steve Waldon and that crowd with all their glad rags on!"

"Where you going, Dave?" his father asked.

"Pool match, down at the hotel."

Through the open windows came the strident ringing of a church-bell, near at hand. Madeline sprang up from the table. "I must hurry!" she exclaimed. Rising and studying her hair in the mirror of the old side-board as she passed, she hurried to the door leading to the stairs.



"Just saw Ted Franklin driving by, Sis," said Dave. "He looked in toward the house with mighty longing eyes." She did not turn, but he continued, teasingly: "Shouldn't wonder if he'd wait for you, when church is out, and begin to pup-pup-pop the kuh-kuh-question. He couldn't fuff-fuff-finish, not in one short Sunday. He don't trot that fast."

He laughed uproariously and his father joined in the loud merriment; even Mrs. Sneed smiled, faintly. Madeline was not amused, but was in too great a hurry to make her evident wrath clear, and vanished through the door leading to the stairs.

"All of 'em are looking at her, these days," John Sneed said, comfortably, after she had gone. "Mighty pretty girl, our Madeline, now ain't she, ma?"

"Say, they all *are* looking her way, sure," David granted. "She races in a class all by herself in this town, and that's a cinch."

Mrs. Sneed's face showed a sign of worry. "She's beautiful, not pretty," she agreed. "I hope she'll find the right man, when she finds one."

"One that ain't as much afraid of work as father?" David interjected.

"Hush, David!" said his mother; but his father did not even take the trouble to look up from the racing news in the newspaper which, when his son had dropped it, he had quickly taken.

"I'm off," said David, a few moments later, when, wearing the newly ironed shirt, still warm from his mother's ministrations, he went through the room again, where his father was only half through the

sporting and political news and his mother was attending to the few house-plants.

"Better stop for Madeline, at church, if you come home in time," said Mrs. Sneed.

"Didn't I say I was going to the pool match?" her son asked, querulously.

"Oh, yes; so you did."

"I don't know about this Sunday pool," his father ventured, very mildly. "I——"

But David had not stopped to listen and the matter did not sufficiently impress John Sneed to make him continue the remark for his wife's benefit. Whistling to his dog and calling "Roosevelt, Roosevelt," Dave had gone.

"I rather thought I'd like to go to church, myself, to-day," said Mrs. Sneed. "If my shawl——"

"What do you want to go to church for?" inquired Sneed. "A stream of words the man who pours 'em doesn't for a second really believe in. Why, these preachers work for money, just as anybody else does. They take that job because it's easiest. They——"

"They're not the only people looking for good pay and little work," said Mrs. Sneed, with a sharp glance at him, but without a trace of bitterness.

Sneed laughed. "I'll get the deputy-tax-collectorship, all right," he said, "and, maybe, next year, the collectorship."

Undoubtedly the prettiest girl of all those gathered, slyly prinking, or gossiping with their elders, each other, and young men in the lobby of the old, white, slim-spined church, Madeline's arrival made some-

thing of a mild sensation. Dressed as she was in simple, brilliant white, fresh from the iron, crisply ribboned, with her rich, brown hair coiled becomingly in the latest fashion (of the little town) beneath a wide-spreading leghorn hat, she made, really, a very lovely picture. There was less satisfaction in the animation of her face, perhaps, than in that of the other girls of her own age, there; there was a stronger hint of discontentment in it; but she was still conscious, in a comfortable way, of her own prettiness, and was not in the least disturbed by the evident pleasure it afforded the young men who stood about, nor by the envious glances which were cast at her by more than one young woman.

"Pritty, ain't she?" said old Mrs. Berkey, one of those universal mothers found in every country town.

"Pritty is as pretty does," her husband answered, somewhat snappily. He, to make the union perfect, was one of those universal cynics as certain to be found. "She don't work none, to speak of—don't teach school, nor nothin', though she's full eighteen; and treat her father——"

"Jack He ain't taught 'em work, much. I guess he pays his girls pills, though."

"Come Yes; with the county's money, or the town's money, or the state's money; whichever job he manages. Th to git."

"Well, someone has to hold the offices, don't they, the n band?"


"Tain't that. It's that John Sneed's lazy, and he's

bringing up his son as lazy, and his daughter's lazy, too, I reckon. She——"

Madeline joined with real enjoyment in the hymns, and, for a time, listened with enjoyment to the sermon; but the minister was prosy and her mind soon wandered. She became conscious of the church's shabbiness. She had worshipped in it (if folk worship, nowadays, at all) since she was a child and had not thought of it before; but now it made a deep and disagreeable impression on her.

She saw the fresh spots where the paint had been renewed after plaster had peeled from settling lath, and scorned the congregation for permitting this. They could have paid for new plaster. She saw the hole in the aisle carpet and did not smile, but actually shrank, more shamed than frightened, when Deacon Prendergrast, with the collection-plate, put his toe in it and nearly fell. She saw how dingy the tassels, depending from the corners of the Bible-stand, were. She wondered if she might not get new tassels, herself, and, without the knowledge of anyone, adjust them before the next week's service, but, even as she thought of this, she realized that if she did it the new tassels would make the balance of the dingy place of worship seem even dingier than it did now. Her eyes turned from the old tassels, and, almost without consciousness of doing so, picked countless other flaws in the simple, shabby sanctuary.

During next to the last hymn, she turned her criticism from church to congregation, and found plenty there for it to dwell upon. What an ill-dressed, awk-



ward, commonplace crowd these people were! She wondered why she had never realized this before. Even the girls of her own age were "frumpy."

This brought her quickly down to study of herself. Was she "frumpy" too? A moment's careful thought convinced her she was not. Her clothes cost less, she knew, than those of many of the other girls among the worshippers, and they were, very largely, made by her own hands or her mother's. But she was certain that there was a "hang" about her skirts, a symmetry about her shirt-waists, and a jauntiness about her hats which not another girl in Alvatown approached.

How she hated Alvatown! She knew that people passing through sometimes raved about the beauty of its snug green valley; she knew that the small river purling through it was delightful; she knew that in its calm, New England way, it was a prosperous community; and yet she also knew that it was stupid—and suddenly she knew that she, herself, was not.

"I don't fit this town," she thought. And then: "I'd like to get away from it."

The thought almost startled her. She had never dreamed of such a thing before, but now, as she ran back through her memory, she thought of half-a-dozen girls who had gone forth from Alvatown and had come back on visits, to recite brilliant stories of the wonders of the places they had settled in.

That very moment there was born in her a firm determination to get, somehow, into a broader life, and the moment this determination had gained form, the life which now surrounded her developed new dis-

tastefulness. In the church lobby, after service, she listened with a boredom almost startling to the chatter of girl friends about the town's "society" events, and of the young men whom they knew and most admired. In the past, the dances, sociables and even the church festivals had held her closest interest; in the past she had thought, shyly, that some of the Alvatown young men were, as the other girls often put it, really "good looking." The gossip of the fortune which "Steve" Weldon would come into when his father died, had fascinated her. She had wondered who would be the lucky girl to get it and the chance to drive behind the youth's fast horses. Now, though, suddenly, she thought about Steve's father, gross and very fat (rumor had it that it was the fat which, soon or late, would orphan Steve and leave him rich), and it occurred to her that Steve, when the time came for it, would be as gross and be as fat. It sickened her.

She was sure that, somewhere, there were youths who had delightful fathers. She had read of them in books and seen them splendidly depicted on the stage. And the stuttering "Ted" Franklin! She saw him, even now, approaching her, working his nervous lips in preparation for the slow business of a greeting. She intentionally turned away and joined a girl friend whom she knew he did not like. Percy Deane, who was also manœuvring in her direction, repelled her quite as much this Sunday afternoon.

She was dimly conscious, for the first time, of the fact that other girls there in the moving groups re-

leased from church were casting at her glances which might possibly be construed as envious; she was sure, for the first time in her life, that she attracted more young men than any other girl among them did; but, strangely, this new knowledge did not, in the least, elate her. A month before it would have made her flush with pleasure.

In order to make sure certain that she would quite avoid the swains who, more or less adroitly, were manœuvring to intercept her, she turned into the little, willow-shaded cemetery and wandered there, a moment, among the moss-grown tombs behind the high, ragged, half-trimmed hedge which guarded an unkempt, well-filled family lot. She had thoughts to think, she found; had wonders, quite astonishing, about herself to contemplate.

It was there, to her dismay, Steve found her. A week before she would have greeted him with real cordiality; now she knew her manner was repellent.

It did not discomfit Steve, however.

"Cheerful place this you've picked out to hang around in," was his greeting. "Seems to me we saw enough dead ones in church for one day, without coming here to walk among the deader ones."

"Are there any deader ones?" she flared back at him, instantly surprised (as he was, too, for, after a moment's hesitation, he began to laugh uproariously) by the readiness of her retort.

"I thought," she said a moment later, not less to her own vast amazement, "I'd like to be—alone."

Even Steve could not mistake the accent which she placed on the last word.

"Gee!" said he, and very soon departed.

Before church he had met Dave and asked him very pointedly, if Madeline was going to be there, revealing, plainly, to the acute mind of the youthful sportsman, what his trouble was. Now, after the sad episode in the cemetery, he met him again, by the pool-table back of the hotel bar-room.

"Well?" said Dave, inquiringly.

"Left at the post!" was Weldon's depressed reply, and Dave went into such mad fits of laughter, after a moment's thought and contemplation of him, that, when his turn came, he missed an easy straight shot on the seven ball for the corner pocket.

He had, in his heart all morning as he played pool, been just a little proud that Weldon, the richest youth in town, the best dresser and the owner of the fastest horses for his age in that part of the State, had thought enough about his sister to be bashful about meeting her. In that town such hesitancy coupled with desire meant matrimonial intentions and naught else. Now, though, as he observed the gross young man, even the gorgeous necktie and the spotted silk of his gay waistcoat failed to entrance Dave. Steve Weldon was all right as a dead game sport and a good spender, but Dave wondered if, after all, he would be glad to see Madeline try to trot double with him on the connubial track. "I wouldn't bet a million that they wouldn't make a dead heat of it." Those were about the words in which he thought the matter out.

"I'm goin' tuh bank th' green ball for th' corner pocket," he remarked, thoughtfully, aloud, and did so, much to everyone's surprise, for, although Dave was a good player, this had been an extremely difficult shot. "An' now I'm going home to get my eats," he added. "Come Roosevelt! Roosevelt! Roosevelt! Where's that dog?"

CHAPTER II

IT happened, after dinner, that Dave and Madeline were going from the house in the same direction. "We'll team it to the corner," he said, good-naturedly. "But gait up a little, sis."

"Where are you going?" she inquired, not caring really, but to make conversation.

"We ain't played out the match yet," he replied.

Madeline was not in the least shocked by the knowledge that her brother planned to spend the whole of Sunday at a pool-table. It was too usual.

"Quite a busy little match we're having for this dead neck of the woods," he told her.

The match interested no more than it shocked her, but the leaven which had so disturbed her during service was working, yet, in the girl's mind.

"It is dead here," she declared. "Dead! Dead!"

David looked at her with mild surprise. "You're on, sis," he agreed, "but—who put you wise? Say, have you been listening to my little sermons now and then?"

She smiled. "No, Dave; I don't believe it's you that—woke me up; but I looked around in church to-day, and then when I went outside I looked around me at the graves——"

"And you didn't know which held the deadest ones

—the velvet-cushioned pews or silver-handled caskets, eh?" He laughed. "Say; you're coming on, sis. You'll hate this town as much as I do, some day, and when *you* hate it, why *you'll* get away from it. You've got some git up and git in you. Why, *you* could want a thing bad enough to *work* for it!"

"And couldn't you, Dave?"

"What? Me? Work?" He looked at her with real grief in his eyes. "The heat of these June days has turned your head, child."

She suddenly was incensed at him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dave!" she exclaimed. "You ought to do something to help father."

Now he really laughed gleefully. "You'd think, to hear you talk, that the old man's back was breaking under the load of his great strain! Why, sis, dad hasn't done a real day's work since I've been a rail-bird watching his performances. It's just been one political job after another and hard picking in between. And politics—that ain't real work! A politician—especially a twenty-ninth-rate politician like dad is—don't work; he only schemes to find some way of dodging work. You know that."

"Yes, I do know it," she admitted with reluctance, "but I won't let you say another word against him. He's——"

"Who's said anything against him? I was just giving you a little lesson in our national game, which really is politics, not baseball, the dead straight dope, that's all. And blood tells, Madeline. A mud-horse will sire mud-horses, and a Kentucky horse will throw

Kentucky colts. Now father ain't Kentucky. That's why, I guess, I wasn't born a real steam engine. I ain't afraid of work. I just ain't intimate with it, and never want to be, that's all. And say, sis, you ain't no real world's wonder, when it comes to that, yourself. You——"

"There are just two workers in our family," said Madeline, "and they are mother and myself. Father——well, he's father, and we all love him, and he'd die rather than not properly provide for us; but I guess, if he had to do some downright, actual work in order to accomplish it, it would kill him just about as quick as shame would if he couldn't do it somehow. But you've got your life before you, Dave, and——"

"And you'd like to have me spend it with my arms around a plow? Nay, nay, Pauline; not for your little Davy boy. Wait, I'll make a killing on the horses, some day, and I'll——"

"You've been going to make a killing on the horses ever since you have been old enough to let Dad's talk about them fascinate you and eat up your time. You're just too lazy to exist, Dave Sneed." Her own ambitious thoughts—the thoughts which had swept her out of Alvatown and far off to interesting spots, where interesting people, each one very different from all the others and every one of them extremely elegant—had stirred her deeper than she knew and made her more easy to annoy than usual. "I wish you would brace up, Dave."

"Not half so much as *I* wish you'd *shut* up," said he.

She took this very easily, although he had not said it with the best of temper.

"You'll be a wonder when you get to be a real, big man!" she taunted. "How could you support a wife, for instance? Even Minnie Logan was so disgusted by your laziness that she stopped writing to you a month after she had gone to Haverhill. I suppose she found the people there had energy."

He looked at her sharply. "Minnie Logan!" he said, scornfully. "Say, sis; you'd better not talk quite so much about the things you don't know nothing of. *I* stopped writing. It was *me* that stopped."

Madeline laughed derisively, but stopped, instantly, when she noted upon David's face a queer expression she had never before seen there as he said:

"That sure will be about enough of discourse about Minnie Logan from you, sis. Cut her out of your bright conversation from now on. And that goes; you hear?"

The girl did not know quite why she obeyed him so implicitly. There had been a strange note in the boy's voice, perhaps, which, coupled with the look upon his face, impressed her. At any rate, she said no more of Minnie Logan, and, for a minute, she wondered with a quick surprise if David had not suddenly advanced from boy to man without her knowledge.

"Well, anyway," she said, "the time is coming——"

"The time ain't coming when I'll tie myself to any skirt *I* ever saw," said he. "Always kicking, kicking, kicking, every one of you. You make my head ache!" There was a note, almost of relief, in his

voice, as if he might be glad that she had dropped discussion of the particular "skirt" whom they had just referred to.

"Hard thinking never'll make your head ache."

"Now you see here," said Dave. "I asked you, like a decent chap, to walk along with me. If you're going to chew the rag, you go ahead or let me go ahead, or I'll dodge around a corner. You'll get me nervous and I'll miss some easy shot, this afternoon."

"You won't miss it, Dave; you won't miss it if it really is easy. It will be the hard shots——"

This touched his pride far more than had her charge that he was lazy. "I don't miss the hard ones," he protested. "Everybody says that I'm about as good as any pool player in Alvatown, and that's going some. This may be a dinky burg, but there are quite some ivory-ball experts in it, just the same. And there's a chance that, if I practice, I can cop the championship of the state. I play——"

"That's it," said she; "you play. Now, if pool-playing was work——"

"If pool-playing was work there wouldn't be no fun in it. Come off, can't you, Madeline? You'll get me rattled, and I'll—hello, what's this comin'?"

Madeline looked at the approaching team with as much interest as he did. It consisted of a pair of spanking bays, traveling, somehow, with a town rather than a country gait—that unmistakable foot-lightness which stamps the city horse of mettle as a different creature from the country horse of as good blood, as

definitely as the city man is differentiated from the ploughman by his gait.

"Will you pipe the white pants on them fellows in the wagon!" exclaimed David.

"They look like stone-masons in clean clothes, made to fit," said Madeline. "I wonder what——"

They saw, a moment later. The spanking team rattled a few yards further toward them, and was then swung in sharply toward a roadside barn. Instantly three men with paste pails, brushes and brightly colored posters, printed in sections on small sheets, clambered from the wagon.

"Say, this must be a *real* show that they're advertising," David commented. "No local talent for this bunch, apparently. This is a regular circus stunt. Wait a minute. Let's see what it is." He caught a glimpse of one section of a poster. "Oh, it's in Havverhill," he said, disappointed.

"I thought your wonderful pool match began again at three o'clock. Look up there at the church!"

"It peeves me to look up at a church, but——"

He swung around and glanced at the big clock.

"Say! Hully gee! I'm off. They'll scratch me, leave me at the post, if I don't canter; so long, sis!"

"Bye, David."

If the wagon and its unusually dressed occupants had attracted their attention, so also had the girl's unusual beauty attracted the attention of the bill-posters. One of them pretended, as Madeline went on and passed, to dodge back, affrighted.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. "One more look like that

at me and I'll go crazy and eat paste. Smile, lovey, and I'll give you two free tickets. Come kiss me and I'll give you the whole show."

Madeline, who, in the country village, had never met just that variety of brute before, stood her ground angrily for a second, and her temerity was quite misunderstood. The man sprang toward her tipsily, and, before she guessed what he intended, threw an arm around her waist. She screamed.

She was very beautiful, and the flush of indignation and excitement made her more beautiful than usual. The man's passions were aroused. A tough from the city slums, he thought the streets of the small cities and the country roads which led to them fine spots for gay, untrammelled sport of just this kind; they were quite free of "cops," and, therefore, nothing was to be feared on them. He had seen David leave the girl and turn the corner. He was delighted by the situation.

But her scream had caught her brother's ears, and, in a moment, he was back again. Madeline, herself, was filled with wonder at the spirit shining in his eyes, the unwonted vigor in his springing step, his clenching fists.

"Take that, you slob!" he cried, not waiting for preliminaries, and striking just as soon as the offender, in order that he might defend himself, had released Madeline.

The man fell, instantly, partly because he had been struck fairly, with good force, and partly because he had been drinking. His companions were about to

spring to his assistance when two young men, both friends of Dave, attracted by the girl's screams, came up on the run. There was a whole town full of them and the bill-posters were only three, so they decided that discretion was the better part of valor, climbed into their wagon and decamped, leaving only a single section of the poster stuck lonesomely up on the big barn-door. "Paul Church—" was the only lettering upon it, and, in its lower right-hand corner there was a bit of a man's portrait—a corner of a forehead and a hint of carefully, very carefully, combed hair, with, at the extreme point of the sheet, a half an eye. David looked at it with wrath.

"I ain't half so stuck on you as you are on that barn," he said, apostrophising it, with, possibly, the hope that this would give Madeline a chance to gain composure.

There was a little laugh from the small crowd which had gathered around them. David had, undoubtedly, acquitted himself well, and the black temper which had risen with such thunderous shadows to his face, transforming it, had left as quickly.

"Thank you, David," said his sister. "That was fine."

"I guess he got about half what was coming to him," David answered. "I got to hustle now. They'll scratch me, sure."

He ran off, hurriedly, leaving a few of his assembled friends, and, such was the habit of her mind, that Madeline almost smiled at the mere sight of his display of so much energy. Then, surrounded by an

excited group, she passed on down the village street.

"I ju-just wuh-wuh-wish that I'd buh-been there!" said Ted Franklin, fat, stuttering and dazzled by her beauty, as he had been for the last six months. "I'd a sush-ush-shown them!"

"They'd have had a chance to get to Haverhill while you were tellin' them that you were mad," Steve Weldon, also a member of the party, said unfeelingly, a bit annoyed because he also had an engagement at the pool tournament which made it impossible for him to tarry in the presence of the beauty. He was not at all sure that his experience at church that morning had been really a rebuff. He would be glad if he could bear Ted off with him, for he thought he saw the love-light in his eyes when he looked at Madeline, but Ted did not play pool, so Steve went on, unwillingly.

"Maybe you are nuh-nuh-nervous," Ted suggested, somewhat timidly, to Madeline. "Mum-mum-maybe I'd just buh-better walk home with you."

"I'm not going home," said Madeline, but she was nervous, and, being deserted by David and Steve, either one of whom she would have preferred to have had with her, she had to take what company was at hand. "I'm going down the road, though, and if you're going that way——"

"Ju-just where I was gug-gug-going," Ted lied, difficultly. He had, really, been bound toward the center of the village.

"Well, I must hurry," said Madeline, worried by the look she saw upon his face.

He was short-legged and fat, and so fascinated by her loveliness that he could not keep his eyes away from her fair face. Resultantly he stumbled, now and then, but did not quite go down, and took no warning.

"You'll break your neck, Ted," Madeline suggested, after they had turned off from the sidewalk into a country by-path. "It's a rough path, this is. Look where you are going."

"Yuh-yes," said Ted, and, inasmuch as he did not once remove his firm-fixed glance from her, immediately caught his foot in a protuberant root and nearly came to earth.

"I was ju-just thuh-thuh-thinking, Madeline," said the infatuated youth, "of how pup-pretty your eye-eyes are. It suss-suss-seemed to me, to-day, at chuh-chuh-church that——"

His foot caught and his sentence went to pieces.

"You'll fall, Ted, if you don't watch where you're going," Madeline warned him, again.

But, as she spoke, she smiled, and that the smile was one of rather pitiful amusement did not occur to Ted.

"I wuh-wuh-wouldn't mind," he declared fervently.

"But I should mind," she told him. "So be careful."

"I was talking of your eye-yi-eyes, said he, unwilling, for the moment, to think of anything except the love which filled his heart with an increasing pressure—a pressure which sent upward to his lips a crowd of words which would not let themselves be

uttered. "Say, Madel-Madel-Madeline, your eyes are——"

He never should have risked it on that woodland path. There was another root, this time a looped one, apparently formed by Nature especially to catch with cunning grip the foot of the wayfarer. It caught Ted's and he fell.

"Ted, if you'd only use your own eyes more!" Madeline exclaimed.

"I *was* yuh-using them—on you," he bravely countered, and she was compelled to smile.

"I'm always stuh-stuh-stumbling," he ruefully went on. "I suh-sometimes think by fuh-feet stutter, too. But they say, Madeline, that there's a dud-dud-doctor down in Boston, huh-huh-who——"

"Better go and see him, Ted," said Madeline. "I'm going in here with this jelly for Miss Radshaw. Her brother's on the Board and father wants his influence."

She laughed and left him, not at all with any feeling of disloyalty at having told the inner meaning of her errand of sweet charity. She knew Ted was too much engrossed in his affections and their outcome, in his efforts to devise a way to tell how much he loved her, to be capable of listening to, or at least remembering, anything which she might say on any other subject.

She took the jelly to the sister of the man with pull, and returning, sat upon a log, in a secluded spot, alone, and thought.

What opportunities did a place like Alvatown offer

anybody? The cramped existence of the family, dependent, ever since she could remember, on her father's luck in getting a political job, a large part of the proceeds of which, when he did get one, always went to the race-tracks; the hard work in the servantless household; the undeveloped and inelegant youth of the small town, who were, of course, her only suitors; her own lack of opportunity to make anything of life, so far as she could see in what apparently stretched out in front of her; all these things depressed her. She wondered at her mother's patience with her flat existence, and then brought herself up with a round turn, feeling that she had been indefinitely disloyal to her father.

The acuteness of the discontent so strongly growing in her soul alarmed her somewhat. She was really afraid to linger there alone and think such thoughts. Rising from the log, she hurried from the dim grove into the brilliant sunshine of the road, and made her way toward home. When she saw before the house, however, the smart turn-out of Steve Weldon, she stopped and, almost as if she might have been afraid of meeting him, dodged down a side street and entered by a door through the back fence. Seeing her mother in the kitchen window she placed her finger on her lips in warning and, hurrying in furtively, told her not to let the caller know she had returned. A few moments later, weary after a long wait, he drove away.

"If Steve should ever find you were at home," her mother warned her, "he'd be mad. He hurried

through his pool, he said, to come and take you riding."

"Let him get mad," Madeline replied. "I don't want to see him. I don't want to see a single one of them."

"Why, Madeline!" said Mrs. Sneed, a bit alarmed by the girl's vehemence. "What's happened?"

Madeline, ashamed, herself, of the contempt which she found growing in her heart for Alvatown and all its people, especially for the young men who were open and avowed, or evident, though unannounced, suitors for her hand, did not reply frankly. She had, in the stress of feeling, almost forgotten the exciting episode of the bill-poster, but, remembering it now, she used discussion of it as a cloak for her emotion.

Mrs. Sneed sat listening, entranced. She could well believe that such a matter might upset a girl like Madeline.

"The drunken brute!" she said, with bated breath, when Madeline told her of the insult; and then, when with real enthusiasm the girl told of the part which David had played: "My boy! Isn't he fine, Madeline? David may have his faults, but he certainly does love his sisters! We all love one another. That's what makes this family so happy."

This did not coincide with all the things which Madeline had been thinking in the grove. It had not seemed to her that, really, a family so circumstanced could be genuinely happy.

"Are we a happy family?" she asked.

"Why, Madeline!" her mother cried. "Ain't we?"

When John Sneed came home for supper, although he had not heard about the episode of the bill-poster, he was full of news which had just reached him from New York. Being a privileged character, the postmaster had given him his mail on Sunday, and among the letters was one from the son of an old friend.

"He's doing mighty well," he commented, in speaking of it. "He's got a minstrel troupe that's all his own. He's star, and manager, and all that sort of thing. He must be mighty close to a rich man."

"A minstrel troupe?" said Madeline. "The posters they were putting up were of some minstrel troupe and all the word they had on them, but 'Minstrels,' was 'Paul Church.'"

"It's Churchill's troupe they're advertising, right enough," her father confidently commented. "He says here, in this letter, that he's coming here later in the season and that he hopes to see the old friend of his father—the old friend his father used to talk so much about."

Sneed preened himself a little, as he gave this information. The glamor of the stage is strong in a small town; the social gradients of the footlight world are quite unknown—the minstrel is as impressive as the tragedian.

When he was told about the insult and the fight he was for a moment nonplussed, but found comfort soon.

"I don't suppose that we could justly blame the young man' for what the men did who were pasting up his posters," Mrs. Sneed commented, thoughtfully.

"Of course not," Madeline assured her. She was deeply interested by the fact that her father actually knew an actor. "It wasn't his fault. Very likely he doesn't know the bill-posters at all. Not well, at any rate. And they had been drinking."

David, who had now come in, received his congratulations calmly and settled down to talk, laughed. "Know 'em? How would *he* know 'em? They ain't no more to him than stable-boys to circuit judges. He likely lets the work out on a contract."

"Sure!" said his father. "He ain't got no time to go around the country stickin' up his advertisements for himself. Prob'ly never heard so much as them men's names. But if he ever comes to Alvatown I'll tell him——"

"I gave him all was comin' to him, too," said David, with much satisfaction.

His father looked at him with a sarcastic smile. "I guess you likely didn't hurt him much."

"He did *too*," said Madeline, coming as quickly to defend Dave, now, as he had come to her defence against the bill-poster, although, had there been no opposition to his claim for glory she would probably have belittled it herself. "He knocked him down, and he *stayed* down."

John was delighted. "That's the way, David," he exclaimed, approvingly. "Yes, sir; that's the way. If you're going to knock a man down, do it *good*! Once, when I was about your age, I was at a race meet up in Albany——"

Mrs. Sneed now had begun to worry. It would be

a dreadful thing if David should become a brawler. Some time there might be a battle in which his opponent would be the victor.

"You don't fight *much*, do you, David?" she said, timidly.

"Sure he does," said Ruth, who, young as she was, had achieved the family habit of deriding her direct blood kin when talking face to face with them. "Dave fights at least twice every day. Eats 'em alive, our Davie does." She went off into cascades of laughter.

John frowned at her, then laughed. "I don't believe so much in fightin' unless you've really got to," he said slowly, but when you *do* fight, give 'em hell." Then, as an afterthought: "How did the pool tournament come out?"

"I hurt my thumb when I hit him," said David, "and——"

"Oh, let me see it," cried his mother.

"It ain't nothing; only——"

John laughed in slow, but not ill-natured derision. "Ain't much—just enough to make a good excuse for losing, eh?"

David had a little moment full of triumph. He had worked up to it carefully. "No; 'twan't enough for that," he said. "I won, all right."

"There goes the wind from your sails, pa," said Ruth.

"Say, I made one shot, all around the table, four cushions, you know," David continued, grandiosely, "that had 'em gaspin', there, like caught fish on a

willow." He laughed. "Made *me* gasp, a little. It sure gave me heart failure."

"Well, if you won, then," said his father, "it was on a fluke, just as I said."

"'Twan't," said David. "I knew how to make it, and I made it, right. I wouldn't had a right to holler if I'd missed it, but I didn't miss it, and it won the tournament for me. I'm going to get the prize tomorrow."

"What's the prize?"

"A dozen pairs of fancy socks," said David. Then, to his mother: "Back to the woods for the home-knit, mother. Straight into the discard. Raus mit 'em. I'm going to pick some reg'lar sunset ankles."

"You need some socks," said Mrs. Sneed. "How much will they be worth?"

"Seventy-five cents a pair."

"How much did the tournament cost you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said David.

"You and your father have such queer ways of figuring profit on these things," said she. "Now that horse that you won ten dollars on last week, John. How much had you spent for tickets during the past month upon the horses that did *not* win?"

"Can't expect that every horse you bet on's goin' to win," said Sneed, not worried in the least. "You wait, mother. Wait till we make a *killing*!"

"The fellows told me you walked off with Ted Franklin, sis," said David, possibly to change the general subject of the conversation. "Did he pup-pup-pop the question?"

"No," said she, "he didn't pup-pup-pop the question! And you needn't make fun of him." She was angry instantly. "He may stut-tutter, but he isn't lul-lul-lazy!"

"Next time a bill-poster or anybody wants to kiss you I'll just let him fire away," said David, "Much joy may they get out of it. None for mine. Hereafter I'll stand by and give 'em good advice—*advise* 'em not to, for their *own* sakes, but if they want to take the chance of bein' bit, why——"

"Stop that talk, now, David," Sneed said, with a comfortable, unimpressive effort to be stern. "You know you'd never let a man kiss Madeline."

"That one'd never tried if he hadn't had a bun on," David derided wrathily. "A sober man——"

John Sneed's small stock of sternness had been quite exhausted by his previous efforts. It annoyed him, vaguely, to have his son and daughter bicker when he was at home, but he didn't know just what to do about it. He turned the conversation by suggesting horse-thoughts to his son. He knew that this would be effective.

"Got a tip down at the hotel," he said. "A chap was going through with a pacer for the meeting at the Fair and told me that the filly, Grapevine, that's to run in the third race to-morrow, down at Gravesend, is the best mud-horse on the tracks. He told me that if it happened that it rained——".

"Wait," said David. "Let me get the dope. I cut it out of all the other Sunday papers down at the

billiard-room. Gee! some of 'em was mad because I copped it first! Let's—see!"

Father and son were busied, instantly, with discussion of the filly's merits.

"Well, girls," said Mrs. Sneed, seeing this without a particle of real resentment, but with some slight signs of weariness, "I s'pose we'd just as well clear up the table. They'll be busy with their furlongs and their handicaps and selling weights for the next hour. Father, move those clippings, I want to get this tablecloth."

"Can't you wait a minute, ma?" said David, rather sharply.

"No; I can't," she answered.

But, inasmuch as the two men made no movement, she did wait; and, sitting in a rocking-chair, contemplated David. The talk of horses and of betting did not worry her so much as it bewildered her. But she had really been worried by his battle with the bill-poster. She was glad that David had so promptly risen to defend his sister, but his temper——

Ruth sat impatiently and drummed upon the floor with one foot, watching.

"Ma," she inquired, "can't pa and David get their race-track papers off that table? I've got a million algebra example to do, yet, before to-morrow, and——"

"What do you leave things to the last minute for?" her father inquired, sharply. "You had all day yesterday to get your lessons. You clear out, now, and don't bother us." He turned to David, who had not

looked up or shown the slightest sign of being conscious of the conversation. "I bet that tip's a good one. What did you say she'd done before, David? Five-eighths or a half? Which was it?"

"Half," said David.

"Well, I'm going to play her, then, to win."

"Safer to play for place."

"And what is there in it?" This scornfully.

"All right, to win, then. I got a dollar, too. Will you place it, or shall I?"

"I'm going down."

David drew a paper dollar and some silver out of his vest pocket. The paper dollar was rolled up into a tiny wad.

"I should think you'd lose your money, carrying it that way," his mother, who was watching, said.

"It wouldn't be much loss," her husband countered. "Give me the dollar, David."

Ruth, who, while waiting for the table, had been frowning at the window, now ran from it in excitement. "Oh, Madeline," said she, "here comes Steve Weldon in his buggy, back again. He won't give up. He's going to take you riding if you want or if you don't. You going?"

"No; I'm not," said Madeline, decidedly. "I'm tired and I'm going to lie down. Tell him I'm home but have a headache, mother, will you?"

"Why don't you go out with him, Madeline?" said Mrs. Sneed. "He's got a real nice, comfortable rig——"

"That horse he's driving's worth three hundred and a half if he's worth a cent," said David.

"You go with him, then, if you're so fond of him and like his rig so much," said Madeline. The expression of deep discontent had flashed upon her face again. Steve Weldon! He was not the sort of youth with whom she wished to ride. Slow, commonplace, the heir to a few thousands which would not pay the traveling expenses from Boston to New York of the heroes of the novels which she read. "These dandies here in Alvatown! They *disgust* me!"

David and Ruth both left, after Madeline had gone upstairs and Mrs. Sneed had told the caller that her daughter had a headache and could not come down.

"I'm worried about Madeline," Mary said to John. "She seems so discontented lately. Nobody here in Alvatown suits her. I can't make her out."

"Blood tells," said John, with something kin to satisfaction, though he, himself, had been surprised, and even possibly had disapproved when Madeline twice refused to see the richest of the town's young men when he came to her so obviously a suitor.

"She feels that way towards them all," said Mrs. Sneed. "I'm worried about Madeline."

"Don't worry, mother, you just wait. Some day I'm bound to pick things right on a fistful of long shots, and then we'll move away from here. And I'm sure going to get that job."

"I'm worried about Madeline," Mrs. Sneed repeated.

CHAPTER III

DAVID'S victory over the bill-poster made much talk in the town, and as he had been the winner of the pool match, too, in his own eyes, anyway, he had suddenly achieved great dignity.

Sitting in the dining-room next day, going over the details of his victory for the hundredth time, he felt much aggrieved at the arrival of an interruption in the form of Thomas Logan and his wife. The fact that Laura, their only daughter, had "looked good to him" up to the point where he had shown his preference quite plainly, and had then, without much more than a good-bye, left town to go to work in a shoe-factory in Haverhill, where she was said to be superlatively happy, did not add to his delight at their arrival. What he had heard about her lately did not decrease his sense of injury. The mere mention of Laura Logan's name always made him color up uncomfortably, and he certainly did not care to stop and listen to the tales which he was sure, now, her parents would begin to tell, the tales which they had told all over town, about the girl's success in her new field. She sent them, every week, ten dollars, and announced that she had still enough left from her earnings to live on very comfortably.

They were tremendously puffed up by her success

in life; and it, aside from other things, always made Dave feel a bit uncomfortable to listen to much conversation about those who had made good through earnest effort. He had never, definitely, "gone to work," and had for a year been dreading that the sarcastic references made to this at home might go so far as to compel him to. Often, when in a temper or when one of her calm sarcastic fits was on her, Madeline spoke of it, and he gave prompt, tart retorts, but the question had not, yet, been raised with force enough to compel action, and he hoped it might be indefinitely postponed. The Logans' visit, he shrewdly realized, might naturally lead up to that too. If a girl could do so well by going off to Haverhill, what might not a boy accomplish there? Certainly he did not care to stay during the Logans' call. He went down-town sulkily.

"Yes," as he left the house he heard old Bill Logan saying, "we're thinkin' of a trip to Haverhill. Laura, she ain't asked us to come down, exactly, but she sends us money reg'lar, so we could afford it. I reckon we'll be goin', now, 'fore long. I reckon we'll surprise her."

David lingered on the steps a moment, listening to the further conversation which came to him through open windows.

"Still typewriting, is she, in that office?" he heard his mother ask.

"Yes; and had her wages raised. Say, she says she's able to just work around the other girls and then come back and ask for more before they

get half started;" Bill Logan was extremely proud of Laura.

David went on down the street.

To Madeline, however, the Logans' visit was full of fascination. She had not taken at all seriously the hint which David had let fall. She listened with receptive, eager ears to the fond tales of the Logans of what their daughter had accomplished in the city, and, when they went away, her mind was seething with the thought that she, too, if she only could learn something, might strike out into the world and in new scenes find independence and delight.

The trouble was that she knew no means of earning money even if she started out. Laura had learned typewriting right there in Alvatown, and so had gone equipped. She, Madeline, had not learned anything concrete enough to make it yield a living to her. She had never thought of earning money for herself, before, with any definiteness, but once she had essayed a teachers' examination at the normal (from which she had not graduated), failing so completely that she had not had the courage even to coach up for the next one. Nor did the thought of teaching appeal to her, especially. She knew from her frequent impatiences toward Ruth that she could not hope to handle little children with efficiency or comfort. But the tales of Laura's great success! They filled her heart with longings and her mind with fond imaginings.

She was in no frame of mind to talk pleasantly to Percy Deane, when, presently, he came to call, finding her alone upon the vine-clad porch.

"We don't see you quite so often down to the Carnegie as we used to," Percy lisped.

Madeline had sometimes lingered with the young librarian in the past, discussing the most striking merits of the various new romances as they came in. Percy read them all with a fierce avidity which kept him quite abreast of the strong stream of fiction flowing in his direction, and, in consequence, was a high favorite among the town's more romantically inclined girls. Too, he was the organizer of the village glee club, and wore college colors and a "frat" pin, although every one was quite aware that he had never gone to college.

Madeline did not take him seriously. She was genuine, and Percy, she felt certain, was a fake in most things—harmless, possibly, but still a fake. His lisp did not appeal to her; she felt, whenever she observed the "frat" pin, that she would like to snatch it from his vest; the presence of the college colors on his hats sometimes almost infuriated her.

"No," she admitted, "I'm not reading quite as many novels as I used to read." Then she let a little hint of the rebellion which so filled her soul escape her, not because she found in Percy one in whom she would, instinctively, confide, but because he had, in the past days, been a link between her and Romance. "Real life," she added, almost bitterly, "is so different. They—disgust me, novels do. They——"

Percy saw, with some amazement, that he had, unwittingly, touched on a hidden spring which led to deep emotion, and, in his fatuous, un-understanding

way, was sorry for it. He was very much in love with Madeline, and the thought that, possibly, he might have seriously offended her, alarmed him.

"Real life is just as queer as novels are," he lisped. "We don't see what other folks go through, that's all, the way we do what folks in novels go through. That's all written out for us to read. We can't tell, so easy, what's going on in hearts around us." He had an idea, as he spoke, that this might be his opportunity and this the way to lead up to a declaration of his young affections. But for the moment he was switched from the subject.

"Real life here in Alvatown certainly is not like novels," Madeline said, almost bitterly. "Of all the dead spots on the earth—I'm beginning just to loathe it. I——"

"Do you think you'd like the city better?" Percy asked, ingenuously, trying, for the moment, to make polite conversation.

"I'd like anything better," Madeline replied. "Oh, anything. The Logans have been here and telling about Laura. It just made me envious. She's making lots of money and sends money home, every week of her life. Her mother told us all about the clothes her last letter said she'd just been buying, and she goes to theatres and such places every other night. Her hours are easy, too. I don't see what folks *stay* in places like Alvatown for."

Percy looked at her with a sly smile. He did not know just what to say, at first. He, as well as Dave, had had some inside information about Laura Logan,

for three days, and now seemed just the time to make it public; but he hesitated, not feeling sure how Madeline would take it. Finally he yielded, though, and laughed his little girlish laugh.

"Says she's making money typewriting, does she? Well, I was down to Haverhill, last week, and I found out some things. I haven't told a soul and shan't tell anyone but you, but, Madeline, she—why, she's just *pretending* to be typewriting. She——"

Madeline looked at him with blank horror on her face. She remembered, also, David's prohibition. But that Percy now was speaking truth did not occur to her; she believed what he had said to be a mean development of the cheap nature which she knew lurked in the small librarian. She flamed out at him, angrily.

"Percy Deane, you ought to be *ashamed!*" she almost hissed. "Don't you say another word to me against her, and if I hear that you have said such things to anybody else I'll never speak to you again!"

Percy gazed at her aghast. His lisp gave way to worried stutters, almost as bad as Ted Franklin's habitual hesitations, but he could not make his peace with her. Foolishly endeavoring to urge that he had spoken truth, he saw that he was only making matters worse. The maiden whom he had come there to woo was terribly incensed.

"It's *true*, though," he protested, as he backed down off the porch. "It's *true*; but if you say I mustn't speak of it, I won't. Honestly, Madeline, I won't."

"You'd better not, if you ever want to come *here*

again," she warned him, feeling certain that this threat would be effective.

She was blazing with a sudden championship of Laura Logan—whom she had never, while she had lived in Alvatown, in the least liked. It was really the instinctive championship of some women for their sex, in general; as vivid, when it exists, as the tendency of other women to belittle the whole sisterhood.

Later she went up to her room in a strange state of mind. Her discontentment with the home surroundings was acute. The Logans' talk of Laura had increased it, and her experience with Percy Deane had added to it. In a small town, she assured herself, one had so few to choose from! One had to tolerate the Percy Deanes! In Haverhill—but there were the vile things about life for girls in Haverhill which Percy Deane had hinted at.

Could they be true? She would not believe it—she would not believe it for an instant. She hated every one who could be mean enough to hint at such things! Percy Deane was a sissy; it was David's word for him, and certainly it fitted him. A grown man who would talk about a girl that way! She loathed him. And David, too, ought to have known better than to "knock" an absent girl. How she loathed Alvatown!

She sat at her open window thinking life out carefully, or thinking she was thinking life out carefully. And as she thought, she found in it, as she knew it (there in the little town, there with the people whom she was beginning to believe were little also, littler than the people of the cities), naught to attract her,

now, or promise an attraction for the future. She reviewed the young men whom she knew, beginning with the luckless Percy.

Vainly she endeavored to imagine him as a girl's husband. She felt certain that if she ever married such a creature she should spank him nightly. Her thoughts turned, then, to Steve Weldon. Steve was very much in love with her, and, in his way, he was all right; but what a way it was! Driving about the country after his fast horses, waiting for his father to succumb to fat! Anything and anybody would be better, she decided, than Steve Weldon—any one but Percy Deane, who would come to one girl with his nasty hints about another and an absent one. Even stuttering Ted Franklin was more a man than these two—and he certainly was not enough a man for such a girl as she was. Why, why, why had her lines been laid in a small place like Alvatown?

Then, suddenly, she compared these boys to David. Which was better, Percy Deane or her own brother?

It hurt her sense of loyalty, as she sat there, alone, to criticise her brother, although had he been present she would have blithely poured her condemnation of him out for all, and him, particularly, to hear. But she could not think him more entirely inefficient or worse in any way than the young man whom she had snubbed that night, although Percy Deane *did* work. David was, undoubtedly, unconscionably lazy. But he was, at least, a man! If David only didn't spend so much time and nearly all his energy upon sporting

sheets and pool-rooms! He had surely been all that anyone could wish when he had whipped the bill-poster. Yes; he was better, anyway, than Percy Deane.

From contemplation of the town's youth and comparison of them with David, she let her thoughts turn exclusively to the girl of whom, that evening, she had heard so much. She would not let Percy's stories influence her against Laura Logan. She had never known, or at least had never been aware of knowing, a "bad" girl in her life, and she did not believe that Laura had become a "bad" girl. It was envy—nasty, petty, small-town envy, which made people like the young librarian so ready to pick flaws in her. She had had courage which they lacked; had gone out into the world and won. Laura Logan had been brave enough to get clear of the monotony of life in Alva-town. What miserable little folk they were in Alva-town!

Then she turned to the small table in the corner of her room and got a novel she had laid down in disgust, revolt and a wrath of disbelief a day or two before. It told the story of a girl who, venturing into the world, had not gone wrong, as they all seemed to be insinuating that poor Laura had, but had been wondrously successful, defying all temptations and all tempters and earning, in the end, before she married the young son of the proprietor of the great store in which she worked, enough money to lift the mortgage on the old home farm.

She did not throw it down, disgusted now; she

laid it in her lap and sat there thinking it all over, until so late an hour that Mrs. Sneed, coming up the stairs, after midnight labors upon David's mending, saw the light still shining through the cracks about her daughter's door and entered.

"Why, Madeline!" she said, surprised. "Ain't you in bed?"

"I wasn't sleepy, mother."

"You ain't sick, are you?"

Almost Madeline burst out with the wild declaration that she was—heart sick and body sick of the whole round of her existence, but she restrained herself.

"No, mother; just thinking."

"Well, better go to bed. Who was that came to see you to-night? I heard you talking on the porch, but didn't recognize the voice."

"Oh, Percy Deane," said Madeline, and then lost her composure for a minute. "What a miserable little thing he is! Why aren't there real *men* in Alvatown, mother?"

"Real men? Why, Madeline! There's lots of real men here. You wouldn't criticise your father and your brother, would you?" Although she sometimes herself criticised them, this from Madeline shocked her.

"Yes, mother, I would criticise them. They're—lazy; that's the trouble with them. They——"

Mrs. Sneed sighed wearily. "I don't know's they're lazy, Madeline," she said; "but I wish they didn't think so much about their horses and their pool games."

And I wish they didn't spend quite so much money on them, too. It makes it hard sometimes."

"Yes," said her daughter, "they spend money on them that might better go to making your life easier. They——"

"There, there!" said Mary Sneed, alarmed by her daughter's vehemence, regretful of her own momentary acquiescence in the criticism. "You mustn't criticise your father and your brother, Madeline. Think what David did the other day. He saved you from that drunken man, who might have——"

"Kissed me," Madeline agreed. "That *was* worth while. Oh, they're not so bad—they're—they're only ineffective. I guess that's the worst that we can say of them. But, oh, mother; I'm so tired of ineffectiveness and Alvatown and all the petty things and petty people!"

"I know," said Mrs. Sneed. "I don't know as I blame you, Madeline; only you might just remember this. It won't do you any good to get stirred up. It's as it is, and as it's going to be. And some day you will marry——"

"Marry!" said Madeline, with scorn. "Whom will I marry?"

"Some good man who'll love and cherish you as your father loves and cherishes me," her mother answered, forgetting, for the instant, that she had voiced the slightest criticism of her husband.

"I don't want that kind of love and cherishing, and I won't marry anyone I've ever met in Alvatown," Madeline, said, firmly.

"Well," her mother answered, slowly, after long consideration, "I don't know's there's anybody here I'd like to have you marry, but you can't tell, Madeline."

A night or two later, when, again, Mrs. Sneed was gossiping in Madeline's room, and, in her effective way trying to decrease what she could see was the girl's growing discontent, they were interrupted by the sound of John Sneed's heavy step upon the porch. A moment later, after he had had time to look around and find that neither of them was below stairs, he opened the stair door and called up to them. He had not been home for supper and David had reported that he had been busy fixing his political fences.

"Mother," he said, pettishly.

"Yes, father."

"Say, I'm starved to death. I ain't had any supper."

"I'll be right down."

"Say, has Logan been here, looking for me?"

Mrs. Sneed was tarrying, urging Madeline to go down with her, and her husband was still standing at the stair's foot, calling up.

"Logan? No, not to-night," she answered. "Why?"

"Well, I heard that he was looking for me. I owe him a little bill and he's going round town like a madman, collecting every cent that anybody owes him. Says he's off for Haverhill at midnight. Had some bad news from his girl, I reckon."

Both women were intensely interested, instantly. Mrs. Sneed made haste to the stair's top, and Madeline, who had been without a bodice, slipped a shirt-

waist on and hurried after her. It was like a novel, she reflected, that she should suddenly hear news of the very girl who had been so much in her mind, of late, and bad news, too.

"What has he heard from Laura?" Mrs. Sneed asked, anxiously, as soon as they were, all three, in the dining-room together.

"Well," said Sneed, "you get me something I can eat so's I won't faint away and I'll tell you all I've heard. It really ain't much of anything, but if you'll only get me some of that cold chicken-pie, I'll tell you quite a lot I *ain't* heard. Anything to get some food."

Unaccountably Madeline's heart sank, dreading, in her breast.

"Well, what did you hear?" said Mrs. Sneed, as she brought in the cold chicken-pie.

"Not much," said Sneed, now comfortably munching, "except just that Logan's had some word about her which has made him start out looking for some —man!"

"What!" said Mrs. Sneed, aghast; and Madeline paled visibly.

Here was confirmation, and, apparently, confirmation from authoritative sources.

She could not credit it, however. It was far too terrible to be readily believed. Suddenly the thought occurred to her that it might have been the story of the mischief-making little lisper which had reached the ears of Laura's father.

"Percy Deane was here and told me he had heard some things about her down in Haverhill," she said.

"I wouldn't let him talk to me about it. I thought they must be lies."

She paused a moment while her parents looked at her with interest, wondering if she would tell what she had heard. They knew she hated gossip and that the way to utterly prevent her from repeating what she might have heard would be to urge her.

"He didn't tell me much," she said at length. "I wouldn't let him. But I presume he's let his vicious little tongue run on with other people, and that it's they who have excited Laura's father. I——"

A heavy footfall on the porch now interrupted her.

"I'll bet that's him," said Sneed, and, rising, hurried to the door. As he approached he caught a glimpse of the visitor through the open window, and, turning to his wife and daughter, nodded. They were all excited, strangely. It was as if the chill breath of a tragedy had blown on them and made them gather closer in the warmth of family reliance. The instinct of the family was strong in them, there could be no doubt of that, no matter how much they might bicker.

"Evening, Mr. Logan," Sneed said, trying to speak casually.

Without a word the man stepped in. He was a little man, with an absurdly and abruptly protuberant stomach. He was not at all the sort of man one looks to as probably the actor in a tragedy of size. His fat face was white, though, and his greying hair, when he took off his hat, a minute after he had entered—for a time he utterly forgot it—stood out on his head in

uncouth, bristling wisps. It was plain that he had been running his fingers through it wildly.

"I got to have what money I can get, John," he said, earnestly, his eyes fixed on Sneed's face with an anxiety which showed how very real his need was. "I got to have what money I can get."

"Sure," said Sneed. "Why, sure. How much do I owe you, Logan? How much do I owe you?"

"I don't know how much you owe me, but I got to have what money I can get. You say."

"I guess about three dollars," Sneed answered. "I guess that'll cover it, won't it?"

"Whatever you say, John; but I got to have what money I can get."

Sneed paid him the three dollars, all he had, that evening, for he had played the horses, that day, at the tavern pool-room.

"Going away, are you?" he asked, as Logan thrust the bills into his pocket without even looking at them and started toward the door.

This seemed to bring the man to realization of the fact that he was acting strangely, and that, should he act strangely, he would be sure to have to make some explanation. Bravely he endeavored to brace up and seem normal.

"Yes," he said, trying very hard. "Oh, yes. Forgot to tell you what I got to have the money for in such a hurry, didn't I?"

For the first time, now, he seemed to see the women. They were huddled, half frightened in the tense

excitement of coupling with his manner what they had heard of Laura.

"Yes; I got to go to Haverhill. Laura—she's down there, you know, and she's—why, she's been took quite sick. Quite sick."

"I'm sorry," Sneed said, awkwardly.

"Quite sick," said Logan, and departed.

"Well!" said Mrs. Sneed when he had gone.

"He frightened me," said Madeline. "He——"

"He'd frightened me," said Sneed, "if I had been the feller he is going after."

"What do you mean?" his wife inquired.

"You never mind what I mean, ma. He'd frightened me, all right, all right."

It was two days later when, after her brother had thrown down the newspaper in much disgust, having completed a slow search of the racing news, Madeline, having picked it up, also dropped it. But she dropped it suddenly, as if it might have been on fire.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh! Oh!" She pushed the crumpled sheet away as if it terrified her.

"What is it?" they all asked, almost as if rehearsed to speak in concert.

"Oh, Mr. Logan——"

"What——" said her mother, but did not complete the sentence.

"Look!" and Madeline, stooping, picked up and handed her the newspaper.

Unlike David and her father, Madeline had looked at the first page, and now her mother read from it where it was printed in bold, headline type:

"LOGAN KILLED HIM; Man from Alvatown Takes Law Into His Own Hands in Haverhill. Shot the Man Who——"

She did not finish out the sentence.

"Who what?" asked Sneed.

"Read it for yourself," said Mrs. Sneed, in a thick voice, which choked, and handed him the newspaper, after a quick glance toward Madeline.

CHAPTER IV.

THE trial of poor old Logan for the killing of the man who had betrayed his daughter was a seven days' wonder for all Alvatown, where he had been well known and liked for many years. Half the town, at one time or another, went to Haverhill, by steam road or trolley, to listen to the arguments, and, when the day came when the case was to be sent to the jury, every means of travel was congested. The curiosity seekers might have spared themselves the trouble, though, for, an hour before the court was to have opened, the old man perished in his cell of heart-failure.

It would be difficult to analyze just what effect all this had upon Madeline. She had known Laura Logan well, and had envied her when first she went to work in Haverhill. She had been one of the few townspeople who had not gone to the trial, and when Laura came home, for a week, at the time of her father's funeral, swathed timidly in black, shrinking from the gaze of every one, cowering, ashamed, afraid and broken, she was one of the still fewer who, when they approached her, could not bring themselves to gaze at her with peering, prying curiosity. She turned her head away at first, and pitied her, then boldly went and shook hands with her.

But really the episode made small impression on her, because of her growing discontent with everything about her. It rather angered her than made her shudder, either with grief or horror, to think about the girl. She found that she was shrinking less from the poor thing's sin than she did from the weak, silly way in which she had attempted, during the short trial, to clear her skirts, even at the cost of a possible chance of saving her old father by establishing some manner of justification for his deed. That seemed to Madeline to be the girl's chief crime. But, while she felt a keen contempt for her, she was, none the less, fascinated by her, and, the day when Laura started back to Haverhill, weeded as deeply as a widow, Madeline watched her, furtively, from behind a window curtain.

It may have been the relaxation, after the excitement of the murder and the trial, which made the town now seem duller, dryer, less interesting, even, than it had been. Her mother, now, sat oftener in leisure moments poring over the big Bible, reading it almost constantly, although she did not often go to church and was not, as the term went in the village, a "religious woman." That got on the daughter's nerves. That anyone should find relief from the monotony of the life which she was learning to loathe, bitterly, in a dull book which told principally, she angrily declared, about the sons and daughters of the ancient Hebrews, was more than she could understand. Her father and brother, robbed of the sensations of the trial as conversational material, went back

to their race-track talk, and David no longer read first-page news at all, but turned at once, as he had done of yore, to the dope upon the sporting pages of the newspapers.

Hour after hour he sat and wrangled with his father over horses' merits or demerits—horses which neither one had ever seen; discussed jockeys by their first or their slang names; watched the weather every morning with keen eyes for possible effect of rain or shine on tracks near enough to be likely to be affected by conditions similar to those obtaining locally. Dave's indolence was becoming, constantly, a heavier cross for Madeline to bear; scarcely less a burden than her own conscious ineffectiveness.

Ruth crept into her room very early, one Monday morning, so worried for her lessons which she had neglected Saturday and Sunday, that the anxiety had roused her.

"Won't you help me, Madeline?" she begged.

"Yes; I'll help you; but don't get in the habit." They went down to the sitting-room.


"What habit, Madeline?"

"The lazy habit. The women of this family haven't caught it, yet; but the men have and it might spread to you. Be careful."

Ruth did not understand exactly what she meant, but gratefully took the help she gave her and then threw her arms about her neck.

"You're *good*, Madeline," she said; "and *you* ain't lazy."

"No; and mother isn't. Take care that *you're* not."



"Is David and is dad?"

"Are they!" said Madeline, disgustedly.

"Here quit that, you!" said David, coming down the stairs, ill-naturedly. Although they had been careful, they had roused him. "Stop knocking me to my kid sister."

Later, after breakfast: "You come here, Ruth, will you?"

"She's got to hurry or be late for school," said Madeline, calling to him rather loudly through the open window, for he was swinging now in a hammock on the vine-clad porch while they were sitting in the sitting-room.

"In a minute, Dave," said Ruth.

"Don't you let him make you late for school," warned Madeline. "You haven't got much time."

"Rag chewing takes time, too," said David, comfortably critical.

Madeline went to the window and glanced out at him, then turned slowly from it, having said nothing more, but with a black frown on her face. David looked so big and strong and capable, as he lay there; and looked so absolutely indolent. She turned again and watched him as Ruth ran to him, the frown upon her face becoming darker as she watched. She saw him take a quarter from his pocket.

"Say, kid; go down to the store before you go to school and get me the Boston Journal, will you?"

"I'd be late, Dave."

Madeline was listening angrily.

"Well, what of it? Being late won't kill nobody."

"It'd get me demerit marks."

This evidently did not impress him. "Take five cents out of the quarter, then, and get some candy," he suggested. "I'm too tired to start out, just yet, and I sure want The Boston Journal. Say, kid, that paper's got a sporting page that——"

"Well, I'll run," said Ruth; and, before her sister could protest, was gone.

Madeline, in anger, hurried to the porch.

"You ought to be ashamed, Dave Sneed!" she blazed at him.

"Oh, it's too hot to champ the bit," he lazily replied. "She won't be late."

"She will."

"Well, s'pose she is. What of it? It won't kill nobody, will it? I told her it wouldn't. Didn't you hear me?"

He looked up at his sister with a grin. "You're all het up, now, Madeline. It's foolish. It's a good day for baseball, but bad for trotting or for temper. Too hot, Madeline. Say, fade away, won't you? I'm trying to remember whether it was Bella B. or Pimlico that won that three furlong last Thursday. They're both on the card to-day, and——"

"Dave Sneed," said his sister, "I'm ashamed of you, if you're not ashamed of yourself. There are other races than horse-races, and——"

"Yep; tongue races," he said. "And, Madeline, I'll put up my last cent on yours to win, any day you'll enter it against the world."

The last bell tolled out from the nearby school-house, just as Ruth rushed up to Dave and thrust the paper and his change into his languid hand.

"There!" she cried, a bit appalled by the dull thud of the cracked bell. "I *am* late."

He did not even look at her. He took the paper with the eagerness of one who waits for something of great moment, and began to turn its pages hurriedly. Madeline stood looking at him.

"They're right in calling what they print about the races 'dope,'" said she. "You hunger for it as a drunkard hungers for——"

"Say, Madeline," said Dave, not looking up, "drunkards, they don't hunger, they just thirst. Go in the house, won't you? You get my mind all off the subject."

"Your mind!" said Madeline, and sniffed.

"Children!" Mrs. Sneed called from within.

"Ma, let me take your shears, will you?" said David, in a sufficiently loud voice to make certain the request would reach her.

Mrs. Sneed gathered yarn-ball, needles, and unfinished sock into one hand and with the other fumbled in her work-basket until she found the shears. Then she took them out to him. He groped for them without looking up.

"That Billie horse is making good," he said, as if he felt quite sure she would be fascinated by the news. "He did three furlongs, yesterday, at Louisville, in eight. George Piper tipped me off, too, but I couldn't see him as a Solomon. Gee, don't I wish

I had! A long shot, ma; but I had my pair of bones on old Miss Mix."

"I thought you had no interest in any sport but racing and baseball," she commented

"The only sports they is," he granted.

"But you were talking about shooting."

Now he looked up from the paper to give her a hopeless glance. "Is it because I said he was a long shot that started you on this pipe-dream, ma?" he asked gently. "Because if that was it you'd better holler for the doctor. You don't never seem to learn the English language, ma. As long's you've lived with pa and me——"

She shook her head, stood, frowning above her knitting for a moment, and then turned away. "Why can't you use plain English?"

But he was once more deep in the small-type mysteries of sporting news and did not answer her.

Madeline, who had preceded her into the house, was, as she entered, worrying over a broken needle in the sewing-machine.

"Bother it all, mother!" she exclaimed. "I can't get this needle to stay in."

Her mother went to her and tried to help her. "Why, Madeline," she said, after an investigation, "the machine is broken! See this little piece, here? It's cracked off." She looked up. "David!" she called. "Come and see if this machine can be repaired, will you?"

He slouched in, presently, not very deeply interest-

ed, and looked the damaged portion of the machine over.

"To the discard with it," he said, finally. "It's all in, ma. Now if only it was a horse you might give it some linseed oil and shot and send it out to one last, grand race; but not for this. Raus mit it."

Mary was appalled. "You don't mean it can't be fixed!"

"I sure do, ma. It can't be fixed in this world. Maybe the new parson might hold out some hope for it in heaven, but on earth, nay, nay. It's trotted its last heat. See where the crack goes to? It splits the whole blamed casting. Nix, mother, on this gay piano from now on. It will play sweet tunes no more."

Having delivered this sage dictum he went out again and sank slumpily into the hammock.

"You going down-town, Dave?" his mother called.

"Bimeby; when the day's results are due to start a-coming."

"Won't you go now and tell your father to rent me a machine of Sweeney? He can get it cheaper than we could. They're on the same committee."

"What'll he rent it with?" asked Dave. "He's flat. He paid the grocery bill this morning, while I was with him, and beefed like an injun because it left him stony. Didn't even have a dollar left to put up in the baseball pool down at the hotel."

"You got any money, Madeline?" Mrs. Sneed asked hurriedly. "We've got to have a machine or else Ruth can't go to the picnic."

"Money?" said Madeline and laughed. "Where in

the world would I get money? Father gave me five dollars just about two months ago."

"Well, I gave you half my win on Bully Boy," called David, not more than half interested.

Madeline went to the window and smiled at him. "So you did, Dave, like a good boy; but I had to have some things. I don't believe I've got a quarter."

"Well, I ain't got but fifty cents," said Dave. "I——"

"Then we'll have to borrow a machine," said Mrs. Sneed. "Next week we can get this one fixed."

"Perhaps," said Madeline.

"I'll have to borrow Mrs. Judson's," Mrs. Sneed decided. "David, will you go and ask her if she can spare it, and then bring it home?"

He slouched in and stood looking down at her. "*Me* bring it!" he exclaimed. "How would *I* bring it? I ain't on wheels!"

"I guess you'll have to take the wheelbarrow, and hurry, or poor Ruth will miss the picnic."

"Well, I don't want to have her miss the picnic," he admitted, his face clearing. "I'll go round and get the Sneed family's motor-truck and join you just as soon as I can fix the wheel."

"Oh, haven't you fixed that?" his mother asked, reproachfully. "It broke a week ago."

"Well, I was working on it when pa come out to the shed and we got talking baseball. I forgot it, then, and ain't thought of it since."

His mother sighed. "Well, hurry," she admonished him.

"If Dave and father would stop spending every cent they get on horses and baseball bets, and every minute of spare time in talking of them, we could have a *new* machine," said Madeline, disgusted.

"Now, Madeline!" her mother said, in deprecation.

"Well, it will be an hour before Dave gets back with it," said the girl. "I know him."

But Dave came back, almost immediately, somewhat triumphantly, for, it seemed, they could not borrow the machine for two full hours, Mrs. Judson being busy with it.

Madeline regarded him, aghast. "That means I've got to work to-night!" she said.

"Well, you love work," said David, with a grin. "It eats out of your hand, work does."

"Your hand don't travel close enough to it to let it have a chance to snatch a bite," said Madeline. Then, to her mother: "I'm going out, somewhere, where there isn't any smell of cooking, where there's never been a sewing-machine and where there aren't any race-horse clippings scattered on the floor."

Dave was alarmed. "Where are they scattered?" he asked quickly. "Say, where are they, Madeline? Them things are likely to be valuable, Madeline. Where are they scattered?"

"All over the front hall, up-stairs," she said, and laughed. "The wind blew into your room and caught up a million of the silly things. They're everywhere."

"Gee!" said her brother and rushed to the stair door.

"First sign of energy I've seen in Dave in a dog's age," said Madeline.

"I don't see what they see—what David and his father see in what they call their 'dope,'" said Mrs. Sneed.

"They're gamblers and they see their game in it, that's all," her daughter answered, just a little bitterly. "They're gamblers and—they're cheap gamblers. It's going to ruin Dave, mother. And father——"

"Now, Madeline!" Mrs. Sneed protested.

The blossoms of mid-June were in the fields close by the village, and, on the road, as Madeline walked toward the open country, the sun was almost uncomfortably hot. But in the maple grove the breeze was cool and fragrant and she sat upon a picnic bench left over from the previous summer, very comfortable, as far as her lithe, beautiful young body went, but very far from comfortable in her active, worrying young mind. It was in a fever of revolt against life as she knew it. The poverty and the hand-to-mouth existence which it was responsible for, the hard housework, with its variations at the sewing-machine and the ironing-board, the constant semi-quarrels and bickerings were getting on her nerves more vividly each day.

She was depressed, disheartened and discouraged. There seemed no avenue of escape open to her; and to live on, laboriously, as she was doing, seemed a prospect too intolerable for contemplation. She had taken with her, a novel by Mary Rinehart, but after she had read a line or two and discovered that the heroine who was, as Christy's picture showed, of her

own type of dark blonde beauty, had everything she wanted and a good many things which she did not know what to do with, including half a score of handsome, ardent, heroic, young millionaires as lovers, she closed the volume with a slam and threw it down upon the moss, as she so often, nowadays, rejected fiction.

"She didn't live in Alvatown!" she declared bitterly. "Her father wasn't a sixth-rate politician, her mother wasn't overworked, her brother wasn't a cheap sport. Why doesn't some one, sometime, write a novel about people as they are?" Then, after a moment's thought: "No one would want to read it, though, so why should they? Heavens! I wouldn't read a novel about me!" She drew her breath in with a little gasp of sheer disgust.

Again she considered the conventional ways by which she might discover some relief from what was getting to be the real horror of her life. She could, of course, cram, pass an examination and teach school. "And be an old maid in ten minutes," she commented, disapprovingly. None of the girls she knew who had become teachers had married well. She might marry one of the young men who waited only for encouragement to beg her for her hand. But that thought, as she enumerated them, was sickening. Not one of them had any romance in his make-up; not one of them was polished; none of them had breadth of view, she thought, as great even as her own. "I'd rather die than marry any of them!" she told herself, and spoke aloud, such was the emphasis of her decision.

The thought of going to the city to find work, as Laura Logan had, did not appeal to her, perhaps as much because poor Laura, now that she had erred and suffered, represented a distasteful type, as because she thought that she, herself, could possibly be in the slightest danger of a like fate if she took the same risks which the other girl had taken. Suddenly she laughed bitterly.

"What I really want, I guess, is ease and luxury for which I don't pay anything," she granted. "But—other girls have just that. Why shouldn't there be some of it in life for me? I guess I am the only one in our family who wants anything they haven't got. Why shouldn't I have something? David thinks of nothing but his pool, race-horses that he never saw, and the bets he makes on them; father thinks as much of these things as he does of us; mother thinks about the house and the dull matters of our comforts; Ruth isn't old enough to think at all, yet. Not one in the family, but me, has any real ambition. I don't know why it is, but it is so, and I am full of it."

Self-pity, either for a woman or a man, is a delightful, but, if carried far, a perilous luxury; and Madeline enjoyed it to the full, that afternoon. Why were all the many wondrous places she had read about so distant and unreachable? Why were all the things she wanted unattainable? Why was everything she wished to do beyond her power?

"I'm pretty," she assured herself, without conceit; and let her glance rove down across her beautifully rounded chest, caress the lovely arms which the

dress she happened to be wearing bared to the elbow, linger on the lithe lines of her perfectly formed limbs, accidentally revealed by the way in which her skirt had drawn as she sank on her seat upon the log.

"I'm pretty and I've got *some* brains; I've studied and I've learned. Why should I be condemned to life imprisonment in Alvatown?"

She rose, stood on the log, then mounted to a stump and let her eyes rove through a gap in the sparse trees and glimpse the village, lying in perspective, on a slightly lower level, just before her.

"Houses, every one like dry-goods boxes," she commented almost angrily. "Not a pretty place in town, like those I see in photographs in *The Ladies Home Journal*; the factories back there in the valley placed, on purpose, so that what smoke they belch out must drain through the town; the best store in the town a cheap, shoddy swindle, the best church in town a congregation made of cads with no excuse for their conceit; even the town bad man a cheap drunkard who wouldn't fight a mouse."

Her thoughts turned back to Laura Logan. "She was a fool to take such chances," she admitted, "but—she had some enterprise!"

At that she caught herself, at first a bit aghast; then, wilfully, she let the thought repeat itself. "She had some enterprise," she told herself, "and her father—he had some. She took a chance and lost; he took a chance and lost. . . . I wonder if, perhaps, father and Dave have not got some excuse.

They like to take a chance, and if they lose they don't squeal, anyway."

It was the first time she had ever seen an admirable side to the propensities for gambling which affected the male members of the family. Now, for a brief interval, she felt a thrill of gambling spirit in herself.

"Somewhere in the world there must be women—actual women," she decided. "Somewhere in the world are men—not dummies like these imitations here in Alvatown. Oh, I want to know them, want to know them, want to know them!"

She laughed a little bitterly. "Lucky for me that no one of the family is near to hear what I am saying, or know what I am feeling. Mother would be worried, pa would be amused and David would just look up from his race-track clippings and grin and say I had a brainstorm. They wouldn't understand—not one of them. But . . . but . . . I can't *endure* it here; the dead monotony; the people; mother's placid, calm endurance and pa's and David's dope!" she actually shuddered. "I believe I hate that, worst of all."

A sudden glance up at the sun alarmed her. She had been there in the grove much longer than she had supposed. What about Ruth's dress? Surely David had, by this time, gone after and obtained the sewing-machine at Judson's, and she certainly must hurry; it would never do to disappoint poor Ruth. Preoccupied by haste she passed over the rough hundred yards of ground within the little wood, lithely clearing a great sugar-pan. Freeing herself of the thin screen of trees, she pursued, rapidly, the hard foot-path at the

side of the high road. She had scarcely gone a hundred feet along it when she heard behind her the sounds of an approaching automobile, and, turning, saw that she knew car and occupant.

"It's George Piper," she reflected, and, in a second, passed him in review before her. He was one of Dave's acquaintances and admirations, manager of the local "opera house," a flashy dresser, fluent exponent of slang, the open backer of most of the town's sporting events. Rumor had it that there were deacons in the church who supplied most of the real money, but he supplied his name. There was much difference of opinion as to whether he was very rich or very poor, but most folk thought, with Dave (who expressed his opinion with real admiration), that he was rich when he had won and poor when he had lost; but always capable of "putting up a front." Not every one approved these qualities as Dave did. Piper was the only man of his age in town who owned a touring-car (autos were less common then, than now), and Madeline, who had never ridden in one, sometimes felt a thrill of envy because he never had asked her to go out with him, not realizing that she had instinctively avoided giving him an opportunity. Now, although realizing suddenly that she was weary, she thought of the smooth ride homeward with a little longing; she involuntarily shrank from meeting him and talking with him, but there was no escape.

In an instant the puffing, choking, undeveloped little auto had drawn up at her side and stopped.

"Why, good afternoon, Miss Sneed," its occupant

was saying and she was looking up at him, forcing what slight smile there was upon her face.

"Good afternoon," she granted, rather grudgingly.

"Won't you let me help you in and take you home in my machine?" he asked. "You're about the only girl in town who hasn't ridden in it."

She hesitated, as she always did, when his bold, big eyes looked into hers, with, although his lips smiled, that searching, greedy glance of his. When they strayed down from her face and roved around her neck and shoulders, they angered her, as they had always angered her. His glance had always seemed to her a really material thing—as if it not only saw, but actually touched her. His eyes seemed almost to have fingers. And he had known so many actresses!

But this time she did let him help her in, and did not even make a very vivid protest when he insisted on a roundabout way home.

"We're going so much faster than you would have gone, if you had walked, that you'll save time, at that." Then, a moment later, when a clear road gave him an opportunity to talk again: "You know, don't you, Miss Sneed, that I think you're the handsomest thing in Alvatown. I says to David, just the other day: 'That sister of yours, she's the only filly in this town could trot *my* pace, if once she had a little trainin', and if she had a fat bank-roll she'd get the trainin' for herself in twenty minutes.' I says that to him and told him to tell you. Did he?"

The big eyes turned to her again, sweeping from her eyes down across her face, over her neck and

shoulders and her bosom. She shrank from the glance as if it had been blazing hot.

They were approaching home and she prepared to leave the auto, gathering her skirts around her and taking a firmer grip upon the little, filmy knit-shawl which she carried.

"Well, he ought to told you. That's the way I feel, and, Miss Sneed, if you'll let me bring the automobile around—make it as often as you like, you know; the oftener the better I'll like it—I'll prove that what I said was dead cold right."

He brought the car to a full stop before the door and sprang down to help her out. As she descended once again his eyes ran over her with that queer, searching greed.

"He didn't tell me that from you, and what's more, he'd better not," was the amazing answer which she made when she had reached the ground. "And I thank you for bringing me home, but I shan't want to ride again. I guess I—don't like automobiles."

CHAPTER V

AFTER the episode with George Piper, Madeline's discontent grew daily. Such time as she could take from household duties, from the care of a small brood of chickens which she managed, from the flower and vegetable garden, and the little lawn, which she cared for when neither her father nor Dave would, and her mother could not, attend to them, she gave, increasingly, to the reading of the newspapers which Dave left strewn in such profusion everywhere about the house. They were just as interesting, she reflected, unsmilingly, after he had done with them as they had been before he looked at them, for the portions he cut out not only never held the things she wanted to read, but did not even back them.

"The horse and general sporting page always backs the baseball page, so I don't even lose the advertisements," she told her mother. But she gave no hint of the great care with which she scanned those advertisements.

It was the department headed:—"Help Wanted: Female," which she cared for most in the daily papers from the city, and even in the Sunday papers she cared for it almost as much as for the much paragraphed and brilliantly illuminated articles which pur-

ported to tell, in many instances, what womankind was doing in the way of extra and successful effort, scandal, clothes and what not.

But she did not do her searching of the advertisements boldly, openly, as Dave and his father studied race-track dope. She took the sheets up to her room, read them, cut out a few of the most likely advertisements, and then was careful to conceal the mutilated sheets till she could make quite certain that they were destroyed. She did not answer many of the advertisements she cut out, but she wrote to some addresses and meant to write to more, while her collection of those seeming to offer possibilities grew to great size in her bureau drawer.

She told herself a hundred times a day that she loathed everything in Alvatown, including, sometimes, even those about her, but she knew that had her family been aware that she was searching city papers for hints of work in cities they would have been appalled, thinking, instantly, of Laura Logan.

That was the trouble with the advertisements. They rarely held out prospects which definitely attracted her. Most of them called either for house servants (and she swore that she would rather die than do housework for a stranger for a living; it was bad enough to do it, there in Alvatown, for her own family) or for skilled workers at the trades or behind counters. Only the very work which Laura Logan had taken up and which had led to her undoing, offered, so far as Madeline could see, any really attractive opportunity for girls in New York City or

Boston—and how was she to learn the typewriter and study shorthand?

Every moment there in Alvatown became more irksome than the last had been, however; it was additionally hard for her to be good-tempered there about the house; David's indolence, her father's and her mother's toleration of it, and, even, her father's calm content to live and let them live on what he could pick up from petty public offices and petty work in party politics, began to seem intolerable to her. She loved each member of the family with a fierce affection which would have made her fight for them against all comers and all odds from the outside, but she reserved to herself a pretty generous right of criticism and used it constantly and growingly.

"You're getting crosser than two sticks!" said Ruth, one day.

"I know it."

"Well, what makes you?"

Madeline burst out somewhat fiercely, not in condemnation of small girls who asked too many questions, as Ruth had, of course, expected that she would, but of the social status of the girl in the American family. She wound up with a sermon upon work and learning how to work which amazed Ruth.

"Study, Ruth, oh, study!" she implored. "Get all your lessons every day and learn more, too."

"How could I learn more than my lessons?"

"I mean learn how to do some useful thing."

"Cook, you mean, and iron, and all that? I hate it. I'd like to sew, the way you can, but I won't

learn to cook. Ma said I'd got to just the other day, but then pa said I needn't."

"No," said Madeline, almost bitterly. "Don't learn how to cook, and don't learn how to iron, and don't learn how to sew. There are thousands, now, who can do all those things, and who——"

"Pa says decent cooks are scarcer than hen's teeth; that there ain't but two in Alvatown, and one is ma and you're the other."

"When I said learn how to do something, I didn't mean learn how to do for your own family. Learn that, of course. But I mean learn how to work for others."

"For who?"

"Yourself, especially—learn how to earn—learn how to be an independent human being, equipped to go where you may want to go, do what you may want to do, know such people as you want to know, and, above all things, refuse to know those people you don't want to know."

"I guess you're crazy, Madeline," Ruth answered. "I'm going to tell ma."

Madeline caught her in her arms. "Don't, dear," she said. "Mother has more trouble, now, than any woman ought to have. Don't mind me when I'm nervous, and don't tell anybody what I say to you."

"Is it a secret?" said the child, delighted. "I can keep secrets. I'm keeping some, for Dave."

"What?" Madeline demanded, inconsistently.

"Where he's hid some of his fancy socks from

pa," said Ruth. "I can keep secrets, for I haven't told a single soul, but I'll tell you, if you want."

"No, no, no!" said Madeline, brought, suddenly, face to face again with one of the pettinesses of the family life. David and his father were always squabbling over socks. "And when you keep a secret you must *keep* it; don't even tell your best friend what it is."

"Not even you?"

"Not even me."

"Mustn't I tell pa, either, what you just said about my learning?"

"No; it would worry him."

"All right; let me go, now. Dave gave me a cent to get some chewing gum."

"He's generous, isn't he?"

"No; he ought to give it to me. I lent him my half-a-dollar to buy a half-a-dollar ticket on a horse, the other day, and this cent is what he promised—interest, you know. I'm going to get lots of 'em from him."

Madeline laughed rather extravagantly, very skeptically, "Run along and get your chewing gum," she said.

"What made you laugh so hard? I didn't say anything funny."

"Something I thought about. Run on and get your chewing gum, and—don't tell mother or father what I said to you—please, Ruth."

"I won't. And I'll have to hurry, or I'll be late to school."

"Hurry, then; be careful never to be late."

Slowly, afterwards, Madeline went down-stairs, filled with discontent. The big sitting-room, with its muslin-draped windows, through which she could see the ill-painted picket fence between the yard and street, the hollyhocks which nodded through the open casements, the spacious floor, covered by its shabby carpet on which stood the shabby center-table and the unmatched shabby chairs, the archaic haircloth sofa against the outer wall between two windows, the faint, never absent odors of cooked food, the pot-pourri jar, her father's cheap cheroots and Dave's cigarettes, made an ensemble against which, suddenly, her very soul revolted.

Lunch time at length approached, and the unset table invited her to dull, monotonous work; over beneath the window stood the sewing-machine, cluttered with the cut cloth for and carefully restricted refuse of a new dress for Ruth—who wore and tore her frocks incredibly; she could hear the chickens bitterly complaining because they had not had their mid-day meal; she knew the garden needed watering and the lawn was thirsty for the hose. These things were her life and she must live them. It was unjust, unfair, unbearable!

But she set the table carefully, as she always did her housework, even putting in its center a small glass vase of flowers from the garden, because she knew her father would be pleased by them, although she also knew he would not mention them.

The meal, when every one at last was ready for it—it waited half an hour for Dave, as usual—was silent

and preoccupied. Each member of the family had his or her own troubles; Mrs. Sneed her worries about the increasing spirit of unrest which she observed in Madeline; Ruth, hers, about the failure of some of her examples; Sneed, his, in the possibility that in the Fall he might not, after all, get the coveted appointment; Dave, his, because he had not had the money, on the day before to place upon a horse which had been "tipped" to him, and which, of course, had won—because he had not had the money for the bet.

"Say, Madeline," said John at length, evidently remembering something which had happened downtown, "your dear Dr. Upshaw——"

"'Oh, pshaw!' all the boys call him," said David, grinning.

"I guess the name is better for him than the one he bears," said John. "Your dear Dr. Upshaw saw you riding with George Piper and got all upset about it, so Deacon Brown tells me. He said a man like that who had an automobile and ran a sinful theatre ought to be put down by the good people of the town, and that any father who permitted——"

Madeline was not impressed. "You didn't permit me, father; he was just coming my way and I rode with him, that's all."

"Well, the parson's all worked up about it. Deacon said he sounded like a seltzer bottle. And I says to him that maybe some good fillies didn't trot along the straight and narrow way because they didn't like the class of jockeys that are drivin' on that track. What the Deacon told me made me mad. I may

have lost a vote or two by gettin' so excited, but George Piper ain't so bad——"

"Well, Dr. Upshaw, nor you, either, need worry any more," said Madeline. "I shan't ride with him again."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe he'll ask me."

"Had a spat, did you?"

"No; I don't like the way he looks at folks."

"You're too thin-skinned," said Dave, who liked George Piper.

"He'd bore right through thin skin and look out on the other side. He was trying to be nice; but I shan't ride with him again."

John was suspicious instantly, and quite ready to abandon Piper for all time if Madeline had been given any tangible reason for disliking him.

"He didn't say anything to you that he shouldn't?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. "'Cause if he did—if George Piper or if any man——"

"He didn't," Madeline assured him hastily. "I just don't like him. Honestly, that's all."

"Well, if you don't like him, let him know it. I don't care who any man is or how many votes he carries in his pocket; if my daughter don't like him she needn't——"

"Lot of difference that makes with Madeline," said Dave. "I've got a hunch that Madeline can look out for herself. Steve Weldon says that she's the most stand-offish——"

"Oh, keep quiet, please," said Madeline, who hated

to be discussed in this way. "I don't like any of them. They don't interest me, they don't care to, and——"

"I guess they care to. Way some of the fellows talk you'd think my sister Madeline was the whole Swiss cheese. I always think when they get spouting that if they only knew what I know of her temper——"

"That'll be about enough from you, son," said his father. "I guess there's some of us that's just a mite too fond of criticisin' others of us. Now if you'd pick the beam out of your own eye, first——"

"It's 'mote,' father, that he wants to pick," said Ruth. "It's his brother's got the beam. I had it in last Sunday's lesson."

"Well, mote or beam, don't matter; don't matter, not a bit which one it is; but pick it, Dave—you pick it. If you can't stop this constant quarrelin' at home, here——"

"We weren't quarreling, father," Madeline made haste to say.

She did not, really, mind her little passages with David, but when her father tried to appear stern and scold David she was much distressed, principally because she knew he did not mean it and would be glad to quit and talk race-track with Dave, and partly because she knew it made her mother really unhappy.

The meal progressed in uncomfortable silence for a time.

David, suddenly, burst into a laugh. "Forgot to tell you," he said, genially. "Roosevelt licked the whole dog population just about, down at the hotel."

"Was it a match?" his father asked, delighted.

"No; I wish it had been and I'd had some on it. They's a place there in the billiard-room where he always goes to sleep when I'm playing. The boys call it 'Oyster Bay' on his account. It's a kind of a nook between a bench and a cue-rack. Well, when we went in, there was another dog asleep there, and Roosevelt couldn't stand for that. The cuckoo in his nest was twice as big as Roosevelt, but he lost size right along for the next two minutes and went out, then, nothin' but a very little dog. His tail was curved so far between his legs it almost tickled him beneath his chin. 'Roosevelt has come back from Africa,' somebody said, and you can bet he had, all right. Say, he's all right, that dog is."

"Maybe he can fight, but what he lacks is sense," his father commented. "The other night, as I was coming home, he had Percy Deane stopped at the corner. Every time he started towards the house the dog would growl."

"Roosevelt! Roosevelt!" Madeline exclaimed. "Come get a lump of sugar!"

The joyous dog came on the run.

"Now wouldn't that frost you?" Dave asked. "She's payin' him for keeping off one of the best chaps in this town."

"The only trouble with your dog is that he isn't big enough," said Madeline, and, having cleared away the remnants of the meal and dishes, while John and Ruth departed, her mother went up-stairs to look after some matters and David stretched himself upon

the couch, to drowsily peruse his racing charts, she settled down to work as usual upon Ruth's wardrobe and her own.

Instinctively, as the machine whirred, her mind ran through the day's tasks which had been accomplished or which still waited to be done, dwelling automatically upon each one and checking it up carefully. In through the windows came the drowsy cluck of chickens and the far-off lowing of a calf, crying for its mother, with the rattle, now and then, of passing vehicles. Within there was the whirr of the machine, and, in the intervals, the rustle of the cloth, snipping of the scissors on a thread, the slow, unenergetic rattle of Dave's newspaper, and, finally, his heavy breathing as he slept. Madeline, herself, had gone down to the post-office that morning, and received two letters in response to her replies to advertisements, but they had both been entirely unsatisfactory and she was disheartened, inclined to give up completely the project of finding a new life and better one outside of Alva-town. She was hungry for a little ease, hungry for a broader outlook, hungry for romance; and, as each failure in her search for these things came, discouragement grew in her.

With an energy born of her dissatisfaction, and for which it formed an outlet, she labored on the task for Ruth with greater speed than she had thought she could, and so had finished with it in good time to begin work upon a shirt for David, which, she knew, her mother was straining for an opportunity to make.

But an interruption came with the slowing of a pair of trotters' pat-pat in the dust before the house, and, looking through the window, she saw Steve Weldon there, making his team fast.

Big, good-natured, gorgeous in a driving-coat with very flaring skirts, a flat-topped derby of light brown, exceedingly checked trousers, high collar and a scarf of flaming red, he made a really impressive sight—for that kind of a sight. Instinctively the girl compared him with the heroes of the novels, and he did not gain by the comparison; but, at least, he seemed a veritable monument of energy when, quite as instinctively, she compared him with her brother. She went with him for a drive.

And her good opinion of his energy increased, as, almost as soon as they had started, he began to tell her of his various affairs. He evidently was one young man in Alvatown who believed in working and who worked. He admitted this, himself.

"One thing about me, Madeline——" he began.

She did not chide him.

"I can call you by your first name, can't I?"

"You have for some years, Steve."

"Well, I didn't know—you're getting to be so grown-up. Well, as I was saying, one thing about me—there ain't a lazy hair on *my* head."

It had gratified her to hear his energetic talk about his energetic enterprises; it now gratified her to hear this assurance from him of what she already knew to be a fact. She liked him. She was glad he had come to take her driving.

"I like that in you, Steve," she said, and smiled up at him.

"Some different from your brother, Dave, eh?" he said, laughing.

Why this should have frozen the smile upon her lips she could not have explained; she had just been thinking just that. But the smile froze instantly. And the chill banished all the warmth of friendship which had been glowing in her bosom for the man beside her. It chanced that at the moment his attention was engaged by his team and he did not note the subtle change in the expression on her face.

"No; I ain't much like your brother Dave, Madeline; there's some get up and get to me. I——"

"Isn't that the Widow Johnson's place?" said Madeline, interrupting.

"Why yes; I guess it is," he answered, much surprised.

"Drive up, please. I'm going in to see her."

He was not pleased, but turned in from the road, drove a few yards over the grass-grown wheel-tracks leading to the widow's horse-block, and stopped.

"How long you going to be?" he asked.

"I think I'll stay all night," she said in a cold voice, infinitely to Steve's amazement. "Don't wait, please. You know, Dave—Dave is my brother." She flashed the last words at him.

"But, Madeline——" said the amazed youth. "Why——"

"Don't wait, please," Madeline replied, and left him.

He waited a long time, but she outstayed him; and, in the cool dusk, got the wondering widow to drive her home in her old buggy. It was a comfort to her to reflect that the Widow Johnson was one of the few women in the town who would not gossip over such a strange performance. She felt reasonably certain, too, that Steve would not refer to the matter, and her surmise proved to be correct. Next Sunday, at church, indeed, he tried to make apology, but she made this impossible by calling to her side as he began to speak a group of girl friends.

CHAPTER VI

BUT she felt bitterly toward David for a long time afterwards. He ought not to conduct himself so that he needed her defence. If he did, she would defend him, though; she would let no one abuse him to her and pass on without rebuke, though she reserved for herself the right of ruthless criticism.

She looked out through the small, old-fashioned windows of the sitting-room and saw loose pickets hanging in the fence, saw the grass grown unkempt on the lawn. Then her eyes moved slightly to where he lay asleep or drowsing. About the couch the floor was littered with his racing clippings. A bundle of them, tied with string, indeed, rolled beneath the pedal of her sewing-machine, impeding its right action, as she moved her feet and settled down again to work. She looked at him without much favor, as she stopped, and threw the bundle to the floor beside the couch.

Busily, then, for a time, she went on with her sewing, but, presently, stopped again and looked at him. Seeing that his eyes were open she remarked, half to him and half to things in general:

"Dear me, this is monotonous. I wish Dave could sew."

It brought an answer. "Sew what?"

"Something besides wild oats," said she, and laughed down at the cloth on the machine.

"Merry and bright, to-day, ain't you?" said he, with casual sarcasm. Then, after a moment's pause: "What are you making, Madeline?"

She was doing dainty hemstitching. "A wedding present," she replied. "Saves buying it."

He did not ask for which of her girl friends the gift was planned. Instead it roused him to consideration of that problem which had been presented to him, so frequently, of late, by young men of his acquaintance, who seemed to yearn for knowledge on the subject. "When are you going to get married?" he inquired, sitting up, now, in earnest, and, without delay, lighting a cigarette.

The question did not seem to interest her. As she replied to it she bent to the machine and pumped at the pedal busily. "When I get good and ready."

It was the second somewhat tart reply which she had given him and he did not smile. "You've got it fixed that good, have you?" He turned away as if indifferently. "They must be coming strong."

She stopped work and almost flared at him. "Do you think there's anyone in *this* town I would marry?"

"How do I know? You could do a lot worse."

"You mean," said she, with emphasis, "that there isn't a worse lot."

"Oh, you've got one of those dream-guys in your noddle," he exclaimed contemptuously. "You're waiting for the big surprise to come along; for some-

thing like you read about in the Laura Jean Libbey books! Well, take a tip from me—they ain't none."

She looked at him with something close to scorn, and when she spoke mocked him in tone and faulty English. "It's a certainty 'they ain't none' here in Alvatown, and that's one of the reasons why I'm—sick of the place."

He noticed the strong emphasis which she placed on the last words of her sentence and was, perhaps, a bit impressed by it. "Aw, come out of the tall timber and I'll lead you right up to the best marriageable young man in the county." He looked at her and grinned. "And if you like him, I'll stake you to the license."

"Who is it?" she asked, not very eagerly.

"Steve Weldon," he replied, as if she ought to be impressed by the great news.

She almost laughed, but did not. Instead she sniffed with scorn. "Steve Weldon! That block-head?"

"Blockhead!" Dave repeated, in amazement. "He's the classiest gent in *this* town. He searched for words with which to tell his admiration of the prosperous youth whom she might have if she but said the word. "He wears neckties that cost two-fifty a copy and he has his clothes *made*—made in Haverhill." He paused a moment to let this fact sink in, and then: "And if you want to know a secret, he's a third owner in Lord Fontenoy, the fastest three-year-old that ever put a hoof on a district track." Noting that she still seemed to be quite unimpressed, he add-

ed: "And, say, I don't mind telling you—confidentially—that his father's got fatty degeneration of the heart and is likely to croak any time; and then——"

He rose, at last, to make his words impressive, and, when he was standing, pointed an emphasizing finger at her.

"—Steve falls overboard into a bunch of dough. Yellow money."

But his sister was not startled by the news or by the finger. She went on turning a seam placidly. "Well, his flashy ties sicken me, his clothes don't fit, I hate race-horses, and I don't want to marry a man whose father looks like a balloon and is liable to—blow up."

Dave was utterly amazed by this off-hand, unfavorable characterization of his idol. "How would you like to have me tell him that?" he asked.

His manner, that of one who chides a foolish child with idle threats, angered her. She stamped her foot, "I *want* you to."

This was too much for him. He turned his gaze away from her. "Well, I wont," said he. "I wouldn't hurt his feelings."

"But you'd hurt mine!" she cried angrily. "Why are you always trying to pick husbands for me?" For a moment she sat looking at him silently. Then: "What do you know about a woman's heart?"

He could see that she was, now, neither angry nor joking, but quite serious, and he answered her in kind. "Perhaps not, but I want to see you get in right with somebody I know—some friend of mine." He

paused, evidently running through a mental list. "How about Ted Franklin? He looks like ready money, all the time."

She almost laughed, hysterically, at this mention of a second rejected suitor, but again she honorably kept the implied confidence of a man who had already wooed and lost. "He—stutters," she objected.

"What of it?" Dave inquired, and then, grinning: "If he marries you he won't even get a chance to stutter."

Her face broke into smiles, reminiscent smiles, although her brother did not know it. "You can rest assured he'll never have an opportunity to say, with my hand in his: "I tut-tut-take this wum-um-woman—oh, I'd rather be married to a phonograph!"

Dave's surprise was growing. Here was his extraordinary sister not only failing to be impressed by his belief that two of the town's most eligible young men were ready to fall at her feet, but actually ridiculing them.

"Gee whizz! You're hard to suit." He took a step or two toward the stair door, lighted another cigarette and then stood looking at her. "Give me the plans and specifications of the kind of man you'd like to marry, and I'll chase one up for you."

She did not accept this interesting suggestion, so, after waiting a reasonable time, he made one further effort.

"How about Percy Deane?" He's a nice young gent, main squeeze in the Carnegie Library and president of the glee club." Percy, evidently, was not a

favorite with him. "He could read to you for lunch and sing 'There Is a Tavern In Our Town' for supper."

"And 'Weep No More, My Lady,' for breakfast," she suggested, thus dismissing him.

He threw up his hands. "I'm through. Gave you three selections, and you balked at 'em all. It's your turn, now."

She did not, at once, reply. Instead she re-arranged her sewing, substituting for the one she had been using a spool of finer thread. Then, very seriously, before she started the machine again:

"Dave, I'm not looking for a husband." She was no longer bantering, but speaking her real thoughts. "What I want most is to get away from the monotony of this place."

She sat back in her chair, her hands spread on the table of the sewing-machine, her feet idle on its pedal, her whole attitude that of one who speaks with deep-felt earnestness.

He recognized the change in tone and what it meant and looked at her with greater seriousness.

"I'm tired of the people," she declared, "of the picket-fences, the dusty streets, the foolish neighbors." Her eyes left his face and sought the open window, looking far through it. "I hear nothing but the buzz, buzz, buzz of the bees in the summertime, the mooing of the cows, the sighing of the wind in the trees." Her eyes wandered to the other window and caught the sun's glint on the tarnished tin casing the church-spire. "Even the church-bell sounds like a

dirge, distant and unending. It appalls me." Her eyes caught the sleepy nodding of the flowers at the window. "The very holly-hocks—they stifle me."

Her outburst would have filled him with dismay, perhaps, if he had dreamed how deep the feeling underlying it had grown to be, but he did not, and, failing to give it thought, was rather bored.

"W-e-l-l, sis," he drawled, "what you need is a trip around the world." He stood looking at her, disapprovingly. "You'd drive a man to the bughouse by instalments."

Abandoning the problem she presented, he finally sank down upon the couch again.

After a moment's pause, to see if he had further comment, she bent again above her work, and, for a time, kept her feet flying upon the pedal of the machine. Presently, as her mother entered, the thread tangled and she came, perforce, to a full stop in the middle of a seam. She sat back, flushed and angered at herself, at Dave, at the machine, and all the world. "I can't get this shuttle to work, at all!" she cried. "Plague take a borrowed sewing-machine!"

Mrs. Sneed approached her placidly.

"What's the matter with it, mother?"

Not at all excited by the outburst, the elder woman looked the situation over. "Your thread's tangled, Madeline, that's all. Slip it over that bar."

"Kick it, Madeline," Dave suggested, boisterously, from his place upon the couch.

"Oh, shut up, Dave!" She was thoroughly exasperated.

Mary Sneed reproved them without the least loss of placidity. "Children, children!" she said, calmly.

"Is there another man in the whole world who is as lazy as Dave?" her daughter asked, complainingly.

"Yes, dear," her mother answered, smiling softly, "your father."

Dave was delighted. "He marked me with it," he declared, triumphantly.

Madeline looked at her mother hopelessly. "Mother, Dave's impossible. Why doesn't he go to work, somewhere?"

Dave threw a resentful look at her.

She paid no attention to his frown and still addressed her mother. "He ought to be ashamed of himself, snoozing around here, all the time!"

"It must be the weather, Madeline." Mrs. Sneed was always ready to make excuses for her children. "It's awfully enervating."

Madeline regarded her as might one who then and there abandoned hope, turned to the machine, pedalling it viciously. Dave grinned at her bowed head.

"There's nothing like being an only son," he cried.

"One is enough," she answered. "We couldn't stand another."

A moment later she rose from the machine. "I think I'll stop sewing," she announced. "Ruth will be along for her lunch, pretty soon, and I'm hungry, myself. Mother, something is burning."

Dave sat up and stretched. "I guess it's the roof of your mouth, Madeline. You talk too much."

She left the room and slammed the door. Dave turned to his mother. "Say, ma," he asked, "do you think it would do Madeline any good to get married?"

"Perhaps if she married the right man." She heard a childish voice and glanced out of the window. "There comes your sister, Dave. Are you ready for your lunch?"

He was further animated to another stretch. "Sure, what have you got, to-day?"

"Cold ham and——"

"Oh, gee! Ham again!" He was disgusted. "I don't want no ham."

"Well, then, you can have some eggs."

"Ham or eggs! Well, if that ain't the limit for a bill of fare!"

Ruth, who had as usual stopped, on her way home, at the post-office, came in with the New York newspaper for him and a little other mail. He grasped the paper eagerly.

"Did you see your father anywhere?" her mother asked, lingering at the kitchen door.

"Yes, mother; he stayed down at the post-office to see Mr. Cohen about getting Dave a position in the store."

The newspaper almost fell from Dave's astonished hands, as he heard this. "What?" he said, sharply. "I don't want no position! Dad had better see me about this job gag first."

Madeline had re-entered, after some dishes from the sideboard; for luncheon, in the Sneed home, was, to save work, served out in the kitchen. She looked

at him with disgust. "He'd better see a doctor about you, first."

Ruth gazed in innocent alarm. "Is Dave sick, Madeline?"

"Yes, Ruth; Dave's sick of work."

It annoyed him and he turned on her. "Say, now, chop that out. Didn't I tell you not to give my kid sister any bunk about me? Of all the knockers I've ever heard you've got the world's record." He lay down on the couch again, opening his newspaper. "There's a ham banquet comin' off, out in the kitchen, with a fried egg dessert," he told Ruth. "You'd better go to it. I want to read the paper. Beat it, you two."

When the girls told Mrs. Sneed that David was not coming out for luncheon, she was worried and made haste to go to him, as soon as she saw that Ruth, whose time was limited, was properly supplied. "Don't you want any lunch, David?" she asked, anxiously.

"I don't think so, ma; I'm sore on ham."

Ruth put her head in through the door. "Then come out and wait on table, Dave." She rushed to him, scuttling in mock terror, and touched him on one of his recumbent feet. "Tag!" said she. "You're it!" and fled.

He frowned and Mrs. Sneed looked down at him with troubled eyes. She evidently did not care for luncheon, either. "David," she said, gravely, "you mustn't be cross with your sisters. Girls have a good deal to bear. Try to be nice to them. Try

to be like a big brother. I know you can, if you will."

He had not been really angry, and Ruth had known that he was not. His mother's worries seemed a little bit absurd. "Why, of course, mother," he assured her, "I'm only kiddin' 'em. You needn't worry. They're always there with the come-back."

But, for one reason or another, she was very serious. "A real brother is loyal to his sisters. Always remember that." The sad tragedy of poor old Logan had very much impressed her. She had shown this often, of late, in unwonted tenderness toward her husband. Now she warned Dave: "Always remember that. We never can tell when the brother will become the father."

He nodded; but Ruth broke the seriousness of the moment by again intruding her small head through the half-opened kitchen door. "Waiter! Waiter!" she called, shrilly. "Come and pass—the—ham!"

"I've already passed the ham," he answered, grinning. "And I pass the eggs, too. Back, for yours!"

"Isn't she cheerful, David?" Mrs. Sneed said, smiling happily after Ruth had vanished. "We've so much to be thankful for!"

"Aren't you going to lunch, mother?"

"No; I'm not hungry, either. I've been baking. I never have an appetite after I've been smelling baking bread."

He became engrossed in his newspaper. "Well, what do you think of that?" he said, at length, not addressing her, but commenting upon the news. "The

Giants beat the Pittsburgs again. Well, if those dubs ain't a bunch of suckers! Listen: 'Forty thousand people packed the Polo Grounds. Ten thousand wild and delirious fans were unable to get inside. The bleachers were jammed to the limit. Cy Seymour passed the ball, in the third inning, and turned the tide.' "

He threw the paper down and sat up on the couch.

"Oh, punk!" he snarled. "And me with a one-case note on the Pirates. Rotten? Yes!"

"What's the matter, David?"

He rose in his great earnestness and walked up and down the room. "Matter? Matter? Why, that bunch of slobs from Pittsburg threw the game down to New York and the Giants did 'em with a score of four to nothin'. Can you beat that? Say." He picked the paper up and read to her, plainly expecting that it would affect her as it had him. "'In the first inning Tenny popped to Gibson,'" he detailed. "'Herzog walked. Bresnahan boosted to Wilson and Herzog was caught stealing.' "

His mother tried to understand, although she well knew that she could not comprehend the greater portion of his baseball slang, but the word "stealing" caught her attention.

"What did he steal, David?" she asked, gently.

"Aw, mother!" he exclaimed, disgusted. "You won't do at all, at all! What did he—steal!"

He paced the floor, observing her across a shoulder.

"But you said he was caught stealing!"

"Sure I did. But he wasn't pinching anything. I

meant he was doing a sneak to cop the bases. He didn't have his hooks out for anything. He was simply beating it for the pads. Now are you on?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, David." She smiled at him pleasantly. "But it's all right, I suppose. It's all right. You and your father know, and that's quite enough."

He nodded. "Sure it's enough. Him and me is on."

She had not stopped her darning, she rarely did stop darning. Now she held up a plaid sock she was busy on, and looked it over critically.

"I'm afraid I'm getting too much black worsted in this sock, David," she suggested, losing interest in baseball. "This one is darned, now, pretty close to the shoe-top."

He, too, lost interest in the national game on hearing this sad news. He went to her and studied the sick sock. "Gee whizz! That's fierce!" said he. "Think of it; a pair of foot-heaters like them, wearin' out in one short season! They're coming bad for me." He took the sock from her and looked at it with real distress. "It's a small chance a sport has got with the gents' furnishers shovin' shoddy at him across the black walnut." He threw it back into her basket. "Plaids is on the blink, now, anyhow, cut it out, mother."

The suggestion really astonished her. She had worked so long and hard upon that mighty darn. "Why cut it out, David? It took me nearly an hour to darn it in. Can't you wear them once more?"

"Yes; at night," he granted. Then, abandoning the hopeless sock: "Lend me your scissors, ma, I want to carve out some race-track dope, for dad. Now watch me cop some history."

She stopped work for an instant and looked gently at him, wondering. Her worry over the incredible extent of David's slang grew daily. Had not her husband joyed in it, and joined in it, she would have made a vigorous protest. As it was, she asked: "My son, do you really know what you are talking about?"

"Sure, mother," he replied. "I speak what is called the 'language of the live ones.' And I speak it correct." Going to the door he stood there, for a moment, and then whistled shrilly. There was no response and he called, anxiously: "Here, Roosevelt, Roosevelt, Roosevelt!" This summons, also went unanswered, and he turned back, worried. "Where's my dog? I haven't seen him since morning." He went to the kitchen door and called to Ruth. "Say, kid, have you seen Roosevelt?"

"I did when I was going to school," she said, looking up from the lunch table. "He followed me a ways."

"Why didn't you send him home?"

"I tried to, but he wouldn't go."

"He'll be back, David," Mrs. Sneed called, comfortingly.

"Yes he will!" said he, unhappily. "I guess he's tired of ham."

"Maybe he's tired of you, Dave," Ruth suggested, chuckling.

"Cut it," he replied. "Go on feedin' your face." But the absence of the dog distressed him.

Having finished with the socks, Mrs. Sneed went to the machine and picked up the shirt upon which Madeline had been at work. Its collar worried her.

"Madeline!" she called, and, when Madeline came in: "Isn't this collar-band a little small for father? I'm afraid it won't fit even David." She went to David, trying the band upon his neck.

"It's the same measure I've always used, mother."

David was impatient. "Oh, break away on that. I'm no tailor's model. I wouldn't wear that rag—not in a million years. It's pa's all right." He thrust it from him pettishly.

"David," said his mother, firmly. "Hold your head up! Hold it up!"

When she spoke in that tone, there was naught to do but to obey and David did so, with reluctance. She did all the measuring which seemed to her really to be necessary, and then, when she had finished, thanked him. Ruth and Madeline were watching gleefully, but they made no comment, fearing to draw down rebuke upon themselves.

"Will you help us with the dishes, Dave?" Ruth asked.

"No; I don't wash nothing I don't use."

Madeline looked at him, smiling brightly: "Brother eats with his fingers, Ruth"; and this remark filled both the girls with glee.

"Well," he countered, "fingers were made before knives and forks."

"Yours weren't," said Madeline, and left the room.

David looked after her with a dull frown. "I wish Madeline would get married and move," he told his mother.

He turned back to his paper, settled now, in the big chair which his father liked best, when he was at home.

"First race handicap," the types told him, "all ages, six furlongs, DeMaud, 115; Delirium, 98; Altuda, 99; Ace High, 93." He was reading aloud, apparently for the benefit of Ruth, who stood listening and watching him, without the slightest notion of the meaning of the words. He turned to her. "Oh, I guess this is bad!" said he. "Me for Ace High; the best mud horse, ever."

He rose and searched the heavens from the window. "I wish it would rain." Then, finding a crumb of comfort: "But maybe it is raining in New Orleans. Pipe that fifth race—three-year-olds and upwards, selling one and one eighth miles." He reached an arm beneath the sofa and pulled out a wad of clippings. "What's the dope say? Looks to me like I had this thing cinched, Ruth." He bent above the clippings.

"Say, Dave," said Ruth, accomplishing the family sarcasm, "some day when you win a hundred dollars on a bet, will you lend me ten cents?"

She flew, fleet-footed.

CHAPTER VII

DAILY, hourly, now, Madeline's dissatisfaction with life in Alvatown increased. She realized, with something of a start, that it was making her ill-tempered. She looked from her chamber window and saw the red-brick of the new school-house. "You'll be dingy after a few years in Alvatown," she warned. She glanced into her mirror and caught two tiny wrinkles just between her eyebrows. "And a few years more in Alvatown will make me ugly," she declared, sick, to her very soul's depths, of the place's pettinesses, of its people's pettinesses, of the pettinesses of the life at home and her own pettiness in seeing nothing but the pettinesses.

"Oh, I'm an ingrate!" she reassured herself, as, a few moments later, seeing her father coming, she went below to meet and greet him.

But, as she ran down the stairs, she was determined to take the first opportunity arising in which to make her feelings clear to him.

When she had passed through the sitting-room it was empty and the thought came to her that, even then, she might find just the chance she wanted, but as she re-entered it with him her mother came in from the kitchen, and Dave slouched down the stairs, puff-

ing at a cigarette, his fingers clasped around the roll of race-news clippings.

The mere sight of her mother, placid through the dead monotony of life against which she herself was in such wild revolt, and of her brother, who, she knew, was wasting his life pitiably, annoyed her. She could not speak her disapproval to her mother, but she could to Dave, and did.

"Two paper rolls!" she criticised. "And both of them are bad. Why don't you——"

"Aw, forget it!" he said, slouchily.

It relieved her to turn from his frowning face and dwell upon her father's genial countenance. Somehow his complaisance did not get upon her nerves as Dave's did. And why should it? While it sometimes seemed to her that one with his ability might have done more for himself—no one in Alvatown had ever doubted Sneed's ability; his worst critics only felt that it had been indefinitely misdirected into politics and love of horses, which, because he could not own them, he was prone to gamble on—she never failed to realize that, inasmuch as he had done no more for himself, he had done all that had been possible for her and all the other members of his family. And he was always lovable, an ideal father in so many ways. It gave her troubled 'soul real comfort, now, to cling closely on his arm, while, with his other arm, he caught his wife and held her to him while she kissed him. Releasing them, he mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You look warm, father," said his wife, appraising him with loving eyes.

"Well, mother, this is just the sort of weather I like. It's fine."

"But you must keep out of the sun, and not exert yourself." She smiled lovingly up into his big face.

He nodded an assurance; that careless acquiescence to a woman's worries which a man who loves and is loved gives without much thought and gets such comfort from bestowing.

Dave sat looking on, from his half-recumbent place upon the couch. He grinned at the two women and their hovering around the newcomer.

"Yes; keep out of the sun and get all the sleep you can," he sarcastically advised. The idea that his father needed to be urged to ease and care of his own comfort, was, to him, deliciously amusing.

Sneed glanced at him without ill-temper. "That'll be about enough from you," he answered. Then, with a smile, to Mrs. Sneed: "I don't think the sunshine ever hurt anybody, Mary; it is life to the fields, it brings gladness to the eye and color to the flowers."

Mrs. Sneed smiled gently at him, with one of their rare flashes of humor in her eyes. "Father," she said, gently joking, "it has been a long time since you were a flower."

Dave seized the opportunity without delay and rolled back on the couch convulsed by laughter. "Oh, my-o!" he cried gleefully. He jumped up and did a swift jig step. "Pipe the geranium!"

It was funny, and even Madeline, burdened as she

was by the worries born of self-analysis, laughed at him, half unwillingly. Then she urged her father to a chair, with her arm still about his neck. "Here, father, sit down. I'll get a nice lunch for you and mother."

"What's the matter with me?" said Dave, aggrieved by the omission of his name. Then, warning: "But no ham goes."

Madeline smiled at him, scoffingly. Her ill-temper had quite vanished, for the moment, in the comfort which her father always brought with him.

"Wait till I cool off," said Sneed. "I'm pretty well het up."

"What do you think of the new shirt Madeline is making for you, father?" Mrs. Sneed inquired, with more pride in her daughter's handiwork than she would have felt in her own. She handed him a garment, and, taking it, he examined it with vast approval. These were the finest moments in his life. He thoroughly enjoyed his family.

"Anything Madeline makes for me is about right," he said heartily; "and whatever she turns out fits, feels good, looks good, and is good."

Madeline, finding in all this a finer, more complete relief from discontent than she would have thought, an hour ago, could possibly have come from any of the little, meagre things of life against which her mind had been in such revolt, smiled at him affectionately. "Oh, dad," said she; "there isn't any one quite like you!"

He laughed and looked at Dave, who grinned back

at him. "They tell me Dave looks a good bit like me."

She shook her head and smiled. "I wouldn't dare say it."

"Say, governor," David asked, "did you see my dog to-day?"

His father shook his head.

"The mut's been gone all morning. If you run across him, will you bring him home?"

"Look here, young man," said John, good-naturedly. "Don't let the idea run away with you that the Deputy Tax Collector of this town is ex-officio dog-catcher. Just eliminate that from your assortment of ignorance, immediately."

His wife interrupted rather hastily, as she always did when there seemed to be a chance of disagreement between other members of the family. "Is there anything new, to-day, father?"

"No," and as he answered he moved his foot and winced, "not even with this corn of mine. It's been giving me hell all morning." No one worried at the expletive. He was as careful of his language as many of the other men in Alvatown. "A corn is like a mugwump," he went on; "no good to anybody." He caressed his foot. "Where's Ruth?" He wished relief for it and the removal of the boot was the only way to get it. "Ruth, Ruth!"

"She never hears anyone," said Dave, when she did not appear.

"She's not home from school, yet," said Madeline. "She's late."

"Prob'ly fell down on her lessons," Dave hazarded.

His father looked at him with disapproval. The boy knew well enough what he had wanted of the little sister, and, if she was absent, knew that he could do the task. "Well, what the devil is the matter with you hearing me, if she's not home from school yet? You know what I want—come here." He held his foot out very definitely.

David had plainly tried to dodge the job, but now accepted it, without demur, though slowly. As he pulled off the boot his eyes lighted on the sock disclosed. He heaved the boot beneath the table and looked at the old man with irritation.

"There you go, wearing my socks! No wonder I'm so low in the haberdashery."

The expression on his face restored good nature to his father's and he laughed. "Why, this is only half yours, Dave," he soothingly assured him. "Your mother made the best part of it. See the area of darns. A case of benevolent assimilation. Sort of a harmony sock." He held the foot out, wiggling its toes. The original plaid ended almost wholly before the foot began. That had been re-built with black yarn. Dave looked down at it, half sulky and half grinning.

"Here, pull off the other boot," his father urged. When this was done a home-knit sock of plain blue cotton was disclosed.

"I don't suppose you could be induced to wear this brand. They last too long. I wish I could find the mate to it."

"So do I," said Dave, "if it would keep you out of my wardrobe."

His sister, with a quick glance at them, her nerves instantly on edge again, now that the old familiar bickering had begun, looked up from the machine to which she had returned. "Oh, Dad," she asked, "how long do you want the cuffs on this shirt?"

His good-nature was instantly restored, and restored hers. "Are they wearing them long or short, this year?" he laughed outright. "Keep up with the fashion, girl. I must be with the procession. Shirts are becoming quite a habit in this town."

"Put a watch-pocket on the chest," said Dave, indolently, returning to the study of abandoned clippings. "Then Dad can go without a vest."

Sneed looked at Madeline and winked. "Guess Dave's made up his mind to return my Ingersoll," he said, as Ruth dashed in from school.

"Oh, Madeline," she cried; "you know those examples that you showed me how to work?"

Her sister smiled at her. "Yes, honey."

"Well, I got ten credit marks for them." She looked at Madeline with worshipful admiration. "My, but you're smart, sister!"

"How about the geography I tipped you off to?" Dave asked, lazily.

"That's why I'm late," said Ruth. "I got ten demerits for it and had to stay to make it up. You were wrong."

Dave laughed, apparently not at all impressed by her misfortune. "That ain't so bad, after all. You

win ten and you lose ten. You broke even on the day." He grinned at her. "Gee, but you're hard to please!"

Madeline, her nervousness increasing, rose from the machine. "I've done enough on this sewing, for to-day. I'll get lunch for father. And what do you want, mother. And, oh, heavens, I nearly forgot that apple-jelly we're making!"

"Just a cup of tea for me, Madeline. Don't go to any trouble. It's too warm to eat much."

"If you've got any pie, Madeline, half a one will do for me," her father said.

"Teacher," David pleaded, holding up his hand, "I'll take the other half."

She looked at him with wise, sarcastic eye, glad to find herself capable, to-day, of joking. "No you won't little boy; it's a ham pie."

Dave blinked as he took this and then had also to take the joyous shouts of all the others.

"I haven't been quite up to the average on food, lately," said Sneed. "I've lost my appetite."

"It'll break the man that finds it," Dave commented, recovering lost ground. Stepping outside to the porch and then to the lawn, he began to call his dog.

"Well, mother," John said comfortably, "things are beginning to look up, down-town. This is going to be about a lively campaign. They've named me as secretary of the County Central Committee at twenty-five dollars a month. Unanimous choice." He looked at her with satisfaction as he lighted his cheroot.

"How long will it last?"

David, coming back, caught the announcement and the question born of it. He was worried about Roosevelt and not too sweet-tempered.

"Until he asks for his first month's salary, and then—you know!"

His father looked at him without much favor—not with definite anger or real scorn, but with a solemn sort of implied criticism.

"Perhaps you're right," said he. "A non-producer of your age ought to know more than a man of my age. Since I was twenty-one I've done nothing but draw money from one office or another, and I guess, having kept the family in food and raiment and under cover, that I'm what you'd call a reasonable success." These solemn statements by his father did not always impress Dave as deeply as they might some sons if delivered by some fathers, but, at the same time, they to an extent abashed him; at any rate this silenced him, and the fact that his father looked him squarely in the eye while he delivered it, embarrassed him.

"So far as you're concerned, Dave, go right along, just as you are. Let the old man draw down twelve-hundred a year as deputy collector in the Tax Commissioner's office and wear out your plaid socks, one at a time. Go right on smoking cigarettes. Don't make any change, whatever, in your life or education. I wasn't much better than you at your age."

He turned the indeterminate severity of his eyes from David's face and looked calmly at his wife.

"And when I look around me I feel more or less

grateful that my only son is a poor chump instead of a rich crook."

She frowned, a little, in distress, but made no comment.

"So far as you're concerned, Dave," his father said, and turned back to him, "the meeting is adjourned."

Dave lighted another cigarette, and, gathering up his newspapers, lounged from the room. He did not seem especially impressed, but did not venture a reply. His father quite ignored him.

"Well, as I was saying, mother," he explained to her, "I'll get twenty-five a month from the Central Committee for four months. That'll make a hundred, clean. That goes to you and Madeline, for fripperies. And perhaps you and she can take a little jaunt to New York, after election." He smiled, delighted by the thought. At times his smile was very boyish and delightful, and this was such a time. "The local papers will have it," he predicted, "'Mrs. John Sneed, wife of the well-known politician and deputy tax-collector, accompanied by her beautiful daughter, Madeline, left this morning, on the 9.45, for New York City.'"

Mary smiled at the prediction, not, as was quite plain, with anticipation that it ever would be realized, but because she liked to see how truly he enjoyed the thought of pleasure for herself and Madeline. There was much of the big child about him, and, while this sometimes worried her, when it found expression in his gambling or some other of his wild impractical-

ities, it was, after all, one of the things she loved best in him.

"One hundred dollars, after taking what we need for clothing, won't leave much for touring," she said, practically.

It distressed him mildly to thus have his day-dream shattered, but he recovered quickly; a bright smile spread on his face—a smile as youthful, as impractical, as even David could have mustered when he was thinking of the longest shot that ever sold at any mundane race-track.

"That's so," said he, "but wait. I've got it. This is easy. Dave?"

Dave lounged in from the porch. "Well, pop?"

"Let me have a look at that dope of yours."

The boy's face brightened visibly as he gathered up the roll of clippings and handed them to him.

"Here it is," said John, after a moment's search of them, "sixth race, maiden fillies; five and one-half furlongs." He looked up at Dave, not, now, with the stern father's eye, but with the easy conversational glance of one man talking to another whom he knows to be absorbed in the same subject which claims his own attention.

"I got it from a cousin of the owner of Merry Widow," he said, gravely, "that she is out to walk in with the money. She will sell in the pools at five to one."

A new expression, one of actual animation, had appeared on David's face, transforming it and adding much to its attractiveness.

"Mary," said Sneed, turning to his wife, "it's just like finding a cash-register that leaks!"

David knew, at once, that fellowship between him and his father having been thus re-established, there would, for a time at least, be no more lectures, no more contemptuous glances. When the gambler's fever was ablaze, he and his parent were no longer father and son, but brothers, animated by the same deep greed for getting something for nothing, deluded by the same deep folly of believing that the feat was possible.

"And if we play Blue Tie for place," Sneed gleefully continued, studying the dope, "and Emily B. to show, we can *all* go to New York!" He winked triumphantly at his wife and then at Dave, who grinned, partly because the fever now throbbed in his veins and partly because it was, indefinitely, not acutely, a relief to have the usual entente cordial between him and his father re-established.

But Mrs. Sneed, first mildly, then emphatically, was annoyed. The idea seemed to her preposterous. They had just been talking of the things which should be done for her and Madeline with the unexpected hundred dollars; now——

"And I suppose you intend to draw this month's salary and play it on that Merry Widow horse," she said.

"Sure," her son replied. "Why not? It's a pud-din'."

"Wouldn't it be a good deal better," she said slowly, to them both, "to stop this gambling on sure winners and really turn a little money into the family?"

They were not abashed. "But this is so easy, mother," said her husband. "And, besides, politicians and plungers are twins on the dope-sheet."

She was not thus easily appeased, this day. "Oh, yes; they're all easy," she agreed; "but I'm getting tired of it."

The men, father as well as son, looked at her aghast.

"We can live and be comfortable on your salary if you'll only stop playing the horses. David is growing up with nothing on his mind but this miserable race-track stuff he cuts out of the newspapers. It's all over the house; I find bundles of it in every drawer."

She sighed, wearily, and, rising, walked about the room, tidying it, here and there, moving, in the course of doing so, a bundle of the very rubbish she had spoken of—which she did not throw away, although David's nervous, anxious movement as she laid her hands on it indicated that he feared she might do so.

"Neither of you ever won a bet in your lives," she went on, emphatically; "and it's my belief that nine-tenths of the horses mentioned in those papers don't exist."

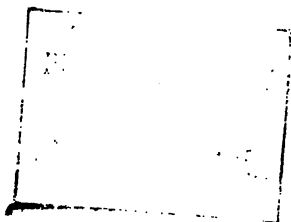
David grinned with comfort because his father, now, was in the same boat with him, swayed and worried by the same storm; his father moved uneasily and looked up at his wife appealingly.

"Politics is bad enough," she commented, finally, "but horse-racing——"



"NEITHER OF YOU EVER WON A BET IN YOUR LIVES, AND IT IS MY BELIEF THAT NINE-TENTHS OF THE HORSES MENTIONED IN THOSE PAPERS DON'T EXIST."

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She did not know what more to say; she was a little worried at having said so much. She made a gesture of dire hopelessness and sat wearily beside the table.

David looked at his father. There had never been quite such an outburst in the past.

"Well, can you beat that!" he said.

"No," said his mother, with much spirit. "You *can't* beat it—and you'd better stop trying."

She took the roll of clippings and, with a firm emphasis, laid them down by David, and then she changed her knitting from a sock for Sneed to some lace-work for Madeline. There was on her face a deep, embarrassed flush, and her hands trembled, slightly; but she had done that which she firmly thought most needed to be done.

An utter silence fell upon the room, and lasted until Ruth dashed in, bound madly on some childish errand, and, as she passed David, knocked the clippings from his hand and scattered them upon the floor. His nerves already racked by what had gone before, he flew into a rage.

"What are you doin', kid? Can't you see where you're goin', you little chump?"

Mary looked up from her work, and wrath, real wrath, now blazed in her usually calm eyes. "*David!*" she said sternly.

"Well, she's got a right to pipe where she is goin'. She's too fresh, anyhow."

The child was instantly contrite. "I didn't mean to do it, Dave," she pleaded. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

But he remained surly.

"Can't you see she's sorry?" said his father in reproof, perhaps a bit relieved to have this episode distract attention from the subject of the previous conversation. "Don't act like a fool, Dave. You've got about as much sense as Ben Tilman. Kiss her and make up."

Dave took advantage of the opportunity to smooth things over, rather cleverly, by grinning very definitely. "I'll kiss her if she'll pick 'em up."

She withdrew her outstretched face and let her lips, which had been puckered, straighten. "Well, if you ain't the lazy thing!" Then, overcome by his widening grin: "But I'll do it." She hugged and kissed him upon either cheek, caresses which he very pleasantly accepted, even, somewhat patiently, returned, and then gathered up the clippings carefully.

"Where's Madeline, mother?" Sneed inquired.

"Out in the kitchen, making apple-jelly for Dave. You know how fond he is of it."

Ruth saw her opportunity. They were good friends; but he had won in the late matter of the clippings. "Oh, yes; Dave's fond of anything—that someone else makes for him!"

"Oh, forget it," he exclaimed, sarcastically, feeling that he had been criticised enough. And, very plainly doing so at once, she skipped out of the room.

"David," said his mother, who was keyed to chide, "you should remember that Ruth is only a child, and you must not be unkind to her. She is your sister. We all have our weaknesses. We must stand by one

another. There is no bulwark like the family. We must cling together. It is the simplest thing in all the world to love one another."

He bent his head, but nodded. "I'm on, mother."

His father quite approved. "Your mother's right, Dave, we must stand pat. Stick to the machine, and play it for place and to show."

Mrs. Sneed, having been aroused tremendously, now turned her glance upon her husband, for his language was the language of the sport she had condemned; she did not wish him to assume that he had not been, in a measure, included in the criticism she had sown broadcast.

"And merely by way of suggestion, a little less race-horse in the Sneed family would help some. I guess I'll go help Madeline."

Dave and his father, left alone, looked somewhat sheepishly at one another. Each had had a share of the rebuke; both knew they had deserved it; neither cared to talk of it, now that it was over. Sneed drew from his vest pocket another long, slim cheroot, bit off the end and lighted it. He took a few puffs of the crude tobacco and then held it at arm's length, gazing at it with a connoisseur's approval.

"Dave," said he, ignoring what had happened, "I've reached the conclusion that a good natural leaf, light-rolled cheroot is about the best smoke in the world."

Dave sniffed the fragrance, lighted a paper cigarette and puffed it furiously, in the evident attempt to drown the odor of his father's "best smoke in the

world." "Did you ever try anything else?" he asked, impudently.

"Not," said Sneed, without a smile, but with a sharp glance at him, "at your expense. Hand me the paper. I want to see what's happening elsewhere. You've read it. Any anarchy going on?"

Dave had read little but the sporting news. "Nothin' much, I guess." He gave the paper to his father and started, indolently, for the door. "I'm going out to hit the hammock. There's too much rag-chewing, here."

As he was leaving, his father, holding the newspaper so as best to catch the light from the vine-shadowed windows, began to laugh uproariously.

"It must be good, dad," Dave said, pausing; "what is it?"

"Good! Come over here and listen to this. Oh, it's immense!"

Dave was interested. "Let her go."

His father read: "'Herbert Grant's summer home, on Long Island, is on fire. The whole of the left wing is in flames.'"

There was in his voice almost the relish of the anarchist when he learns that property belonging to the prosperous is being or has been destroyed.

"'There are over one hundred thousand dollars' worth of old masters in the main salon and a collection of Gobelin tapestries on the second floor that cannot be duplicated anywhere in the civilized world.'"

The news plainly filled him with delight.

"'The castle,'" he went on, "'cost nearly two million dollars.'

"Well, if that isn't the best news I ever read! Pictures, bric-a-brac, statuary and money, all going up in smoke!"

He laid the paper down upon his knee and his face sobered.

"Well, who cares a damn?" he said, cheerfully.

David looked at him, somewhat astonished. "What did Grant ever do to you?"

"Nothing," said his father, "but he can afford it. The more wealth a man has, the better he can stand to have a fire. To my mind the destruction of property is what makes all men equal. It's the hand of Providence—slapping them on the wrist. And—I concur. The rich are just about as offensive, to me, as a split ticket."

Dave did not grasp his father's point of view, but he guessed at it, crudely. There was something in the philosophy of the man with little who resents the fact that other men have much, no matter how unclouded their clear title to it may be, that appealed to him—appealed vaguely, for he was not a thinker, but appealed.

"Go on, read some more; I kind of like it, myself," he said. "It must have set him back some!"

But the satisfaction had suddenly departed from his father's face.

"What's this?" he said, evidently startled. Then he read: "'The fire started in the Grant stable. All of the horses were rescued by the grooms except a

yearling filly sired by a great grandson of Electioneer. The colt was suffocated.' ”

Dave, too, was impressed and sobered. “What? Does it say that?”

His father let the paper fall to his knee and looked off into space. “Well, isn’t that hell? What kind of a bunch must Grant have in his stables to let stock like that perish? By the gods, something should be done to them, good and proper!” There was real feeling in his voice. “Think of it, Dave—the poor filly! She was suffocated! A fine chance the horse has got on Long Island!”

“Pretty rotten. Was the horse insured?”

Sneed threw the paper to the floor and rose.

“What’s that got to do with it? Pictures, tapestry, old junk collected the devil knows where, can all be replaced. That’s nothing.” He was very earnest. “Believe me, Dave, it is absolutely and positively nothing! But a colt with Electioneer blood in her! Think, boy! *That* is the work of God!”

As Madeline entered, at the completion of this sentence, he stood there, before his son, his hand upraised, as might an orator raise his in emphasis of an important point. It startled her.

“Father!” she exclaimed. “What on earth is the matter?”

“*That*,” he repeated, “is the work of God!”

“What does he mean, David?” she inquired, much puzzled, possibly a bit alarmed.

“Search me!” said the youth, unable to rise with him to such great heights of grief because a race-

horse had been burned to death. His love of racing did not, as yet, include a real love of the horse bred to the sport. He turned, saying: "I'm going downtown."

But Madeline was really alarmed. She had never seen her father more worked up. She went to him and put her hands upon his shoulders. "Now, what is it?" she coaxed. "Come, tell your girl."

"You wouldn't understand," he answered. "The feminine mind can't grasp the overwhelming blow which has just fallen on me out of a clear sky." There was real feeling in his voice, as he sank into his chair.

"Nonsense, father. The feminine mind can grasp anything. Come now, what is it?"

"Well, if you must know, a yearling filly with Electioneer blood in her veins was suffocated to death this morning in the stables of that confounded lunatic, Herbert Grant."

She was relieved and showed it. "Oh, there are worse things than that, dad; there are other misfortunes."

"None are worse than that. Electioneer stock, Madeline!"

She smiled wisely. "Did you ever stop to think about human beings who are suffocated?"

And, with the words, there came into her mind an application of them to her own case. She stopped smiling and looked straight into his eyes. This, plainly, was the time and the place to state her case to him.

"What do you mean?" he asked, vaguely worried.

"Wait. Many things," said she. "I want to talk to you." She pulled an ottoman toward him and seated herself on it. "I'll sit here, at your feet. There, now, you're comfy?"

He nodded and she put her hand upon his knee. "There is so much to say to you."

"What's this all about?" He was puzzled and uncomfortable.

"It's principally about me."

CHAPTER VIII

HER father looked at her with some anxiety; she, herself, was suddenly impressed with the conviction that unexpectedly a great occasion, a great crisis, had arisen in her life. She had had no previous thought of going over with her father, or with any one, the grave troubles which beset her. Now she realized that it would be a comfort, and, more than likely, a protection to do so.

"Of late, father," she said, slowly, "I've been doing a great deal of thinking."

"Yes, Madeline," said Sneed, not much reassured.

"Thinking of the places I have never seen, of the cities I have only read about, of the advantages of knowing more, seeing more, doing more."

He felt, instinctively, that he must combat what she had to say, although he did not find it possible to guess what line her talk would take. Vaguely he wondered, worried.

"Doing more?" said he, uncomfortably. "Ain't you doing enough here?" Then, arguing in advance against what he now felt instinctively was coming: "You've got a good home—and friends."

She shook her head. "Not many friends that I care about. You see, dad, a girl with ambitions, with

—an imagination—can't—can't find herself, in a village like this. Really she can't."

So that was it. She wanted to leave Alvatown. Discontent had bitten into her until——

"Now, Madeline," said he, trying to be pleasantly final, "take a tip from the old man. It's a good deal better to be somebody here *than* nobody elsewhere."

She looked at him with wide reflective eyes, and, for a moment, sat in silence. Then she took his hand. "You don't understand."

"Yes, I do, Madeline," he hastened to assure her. "You take me, for instance. I stand well, here; but what kind of a political influence would *I* be in—New York?" He waited for an answer, with an air, almost, of triumph over the unanswerableness of his argument. "I'd be a dead one!"

She tried to interrupt him. "But I mean——" she began.

John Sneed would not let her interrupt, just then, however. He had started on a line of argument which he felt sure would be effective and he wished to finish it before she turned the conversation to some other phase of this startling subject.

"And where would Dave get off, if he went to Fall River?" He paused, giving her time for answer, but she did not take advantage of it. "He'd be arrested for vagrancy," he declared, "but here in Alvatown he's quite a popular sport in a way." There was an air of triumph on his fat, good-natured, worried face as he voiced this logical conclusion.

"Dad, dad!" said Madeline. "Won't you *please*

listen to me? I want to get a position somewhere. I want to amount to something."

He shook his head in disapproval which amounted to real, very definite, worry.

"That's all very well, but what could you do? Now suppose you *did* go away; tell me, what *could* you do? He felt that he was fighting for his life, and, in a way he was, almost; he was fighting for the preservation of the family as a unit, and the family, to John Sneed, was practically all there was in life. Even his interest in horses, his general worship of the Goddess Chance, were infinitely small matters when compared to the coherence of the Family. "What *could* you do?" he asked, again.

It puzzled her and she was slow in answering. Finally, and hesitantly: "Well . . . I could be a book-keeper . . . or saleslady . . . or learn stenography . . . or perhaps I could get a position as a singer in some big church choir."

He was worried quite beyond the power of the small vocabulary which he possessed to tell. He wished to urge upon her that strongest argument of all, the Family, which incoherently presented itself in his own mind; but could not do it. He wanted to explain to her the tragedy which it would be for any member of this often bickering, but always loving, group to go forth from the shadow of its roof-tree, save for the one, to his mind, entirely legitimate purpose of, for themselves, establishing a new Family; but words failed him. He could only combat her assertions with bald statements.

"No; there's too many singers now. And those other jobs don't look good to me . . . I think . . . home's the best place for poor people like us, Madeline. I ain't rich, but I mean to keep the family together as long as I can. Say——"

He paused, wondering how best to put the thought which had suddenly obtruded. But there was a timbre in the tone with which he uttered the one word which caught her attention and held it in expectancy.

"What is it?" she inquired, while he, silently, was trying to arrange his words.

He took a cheroot from his vest pocket, bit the end off and lit it.

"You remember Joe Logan's daughter?"

It seemed almost indelicate, to him, almost an accusation, to mention Laura Logan, thus, at such a time, to Madeline; but he felt that he must do it.

"Why—yes," said she, her eyes averted. She had half feared this.

"Well, you know what happened!"

"Oh, don't speak about that!"

"I don't like to, Madeline," said Sneed, unhappily, "but the poor girl had some of your foolish notions about small towns."

Madeline did not look up at him and he paused, for a time, fingering his lower lip, a habit with him when he was in really deep thought.

"Had some foolish notions about small towns, went to a big town, and—didn't find things just like she expected. And—Joe—when he went down to see her, Madeline, I reckon you remember—he didn't find

things just like he expected, either. You remember all of—that?”

There was real emotion in his face, as he said this and thought about the tragedy; guessed at the emotions of that other father who had let his family get separated; imagined, dimly, what poor Laura Logan had gone through.

Madeline still sat, quite silent, her head down and her gaze upon the floor.

“It was pretty tough on Joe, Madeline, and worse, still, for Mrs. Logan. Laura, she——”

Had he tried with all his soul to be adroit he could not have succeeded better.

That was it—that was the strongest argument, she knew, against her going out from Alvatown—the ones who would be left behind. Even if things went wrong with her, she would suffer less than they; and if they went as right as possible with her, and she did not suffer in the least, still they would suffer.

She was startled and chagrined by the twist the argument had taken. “Father! Father!” she exclaimed.

He seemed, now, to be a different John Sneed from the good-natured, somewhat ineffective man, whom, everyday, through all her life, she had seen about the house; indolent, inefficient, loving, unselfish in ten thousand ways, careless of his talk and, to some extent, careless of his children’s rearing. There came to his old face, despite the fat on it, an expression which transfigured it; the stern look of a Nemesis, the fighting eye-glint of a warrior battling for the one Big

Thing his mind acknowledges. The Family was threatened, and John Sneed was rising, in this argument, as best he knew, to its defense.

"It's a terrible thing to have to kill a man," he said, in a strange voice, "but Joe was right."

He waited ten full seconds, biting fiercely his cheroot, then his eyes, now hard as steel, fixed on his daughter's fascinated, upturned gaze:

"By God, he was right!"

She shrank from him a little, her eyes unusually widened. Still, she did not, for a second, take them from his.

He smote his chair-arm heavily and then rose, standing, afterwards, and looking down at her.

"No," he declared, with emphasis, not unkindly but decided, "I can't let you go. Don't ask it, Madeline."

Still she did not answer; he stood there, head drooped, ruminating heavily. Finally he shook his head with a slow, powerful negative.

"No, no! Wait a little while, girl. I'll take care of you. We're not so bad off as we might be."

All the high-flown argument which Madeline had, through sleepless nights and discontented days, prepared for use at just this moment, failed her. She could only sink, with acquiescence, back upon her seat and gaze with hopeless, dull, disappointed eyes out of the open window, where the hollyhocks were nodding in the breeze. Their very sleepiness of movement added to her discontent; the knowledge that she had quite failed in trying to convince her father made this discontent well nigh unbearable.

"Oh, I'm so tired of this town, dad!" she murmured, wearily.

She dropped her head into her hands and, for a moment, sat there, as he stood looking down at her, distressed. Then she rose wearily, crossed the room with languid step and took her seat in the old, shabby chair that stood before the sewing-machine—the seat that seemed to her symbolical of all the things she hated most in life.

"Well, who isn't tired of it?" he replied. "I've been tired of it for forty years."

This seemed to her to be a quibble. It had not occurred to her that any of the dullnesses which she so revolted against could be as terribly distasteful to anyone else as they were to her.

"Yes," she admitted, "but you've been obliged to stay here. There isn't any other place for you to go. You—don't even dream about anything else!"

He did not answer. He had had his dreams, but that was long ago, so long ago that, now, he found it difficult, impossible, to recall the vague visions into definiteness.

She worked her feet upon the pedals furiously, her eyes so blinded that she knew the seam went wrong. But this did not stop her. She might better have to do the work all over, she might better spoil the cloth than speak to him, just then. After having worked off some of her emotion, she ceased, though, and looked at him.

"It is different with me," she said.

He had a subtle sense that the strain had, to some

extent, been taken from her soul by the swift work at the machine. He had seen that she was sewing wildly, not for the seam's sake, but her own. He was not afraid, now, to change his tone to one of cheerfulness, to make an effort to relieve the situation of its tensivity. He smiled.

"I'd like to go to New Orleans," he ventured.

This, too, was a quibble, and he knew it and she knew it. But she did not charge him with it. Instead: "And you'd like to come back, too; but that's not the way I feel."

She decided that she would not give up hope. She went to him again, and put her hand upon his shoulder, urging.

"There are plenty of things I can do that would make you proud of me," she argued, almost desperately.

He shook his head, disappointed to find the subject still quite vital. He had hoped that she had abandoned it.

"You mustn't misunderstand me, dad," she insisted, "but I want to go away—and stay away."

This hurt him and he showed it in his tone and in his gesture.

"You want to go away and stay away? To leave me and Dave and Ruth and your mother? Break up the family—and never come back to us again?"

There was a note in his voice of actual incredulity which stung her.

But she would not be forced to abandonment of everything. "Not, at least, until I've done some-

thing, seen something and know something," she answered, doggedly.

For the first time, now, he fully realized that this matter was extremely serious. "Well, then," he said, almost tremulously, although he fought against it, "where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere," she answered, more than a little recklessly.

"Who with?"

"Anybody!" And this she said with more than recklessness, with what seemed like actual desperation.

"Madeline!" he cried.

There was a tone almost of anguish in his voice and she was quick to notice it, but her desperation fought against an inch of yielding. As he leaned forward, searching her flushed face with anxious eyes, she tried hard not to flinch; but she did flinch, paled, weakened.

"I don't know what to do about it, girl," he said, almost hopelessly. "I can't make you stay at home . . . But I want you to. I want you here, Madeline, with my whole heart, and I'll be miserable if you go away. We—all love you."

His voice broke, now, and a disheartened, worried thrill passed through her—a thrill which she quite recognized as the forerunner of surrender. When he held his arms out toward her she accepted the safe, if the dull refuge, which they offered, with a relaxation which, at least, meant comfort; and the battle ended for the time.

"Then I'll try, dad, to be contented," she said,

waveringly. "Really, I'll try with all my heart. Don't—feel badly about it. Just be—patient with me."

She was divided between a strong, unwonted thrill of love for her father and for all of them, and a sense of bitter, bitter disappointment; a sense of failure, dire, complete, momentous.

Ruth ran in from the kitchen. "Oh, Madeline, that apple-jelly aint going to jell. It's all flabby, like soft-soap."

It was the final straw. She burst out, with real passion: "I don't care whether it jells or not. I'm tired of making jams and jellies, all summer! It's one tiresome round of cooking, stewing and pickeling day in and day out."

The jelly that wouldn't jell had been the one thing needed, in the course of this tremendous morning, to bring her nervousness to a full climax. Ruth, the unwitting cause of it and victim of it, shrank back, frightened and completely puzzled.

"Madeline! Madeline!" said her father, shocked.

She whirled toward him and stamped her foot, her nerves gone utterly to wreck. Why hadn't he helped her, instead of hindering her, if he wished her to be pleasant?

"With sewing and sweeping and scrubbing and slaving, I'm disgusted!" she exclaimed. "Am I to have no youth, no girlhood?" It was real revolt.

Ruth, halted in the center of the room, was quite dumbfounded by this outburst from her sister. She had come in, merrily, to triumph over the imperfections of the jelly and had stepped, skipingly, into

the middle of a drama. She was frightened, but, also, she was fascinated. Madeline whirled from her father and faced her. The child, newly astonished, and, now, wholly frightened, cowered.

"Why do you come to tell me this?" Madeline demanded. "I can't do everything! Suppose it doesn't jell—will the world come to an end? Is there not something pleasant you can say to me? Must I be continually found fault with?"

Ruth shrank back from her sister's blazing eyes. Her chin began to tremble and her hand went to her eyes.

"Answer me!" said Madeline, distraught.

Poor Ruth began to cry.

"I didn't mean—to make you—ang—ry, Madeline," she wailed.

Sneed was highly incensed. His nerves, too, had been wrought upon by what had been occurring.

"That's nice, ain't it!" he declared, sarcastically. "Fine exhibition of temper! Fine training for a child! He turned from the angry girl and weeping child, disgusted. "And women want the ballot!" he exclaimed, as, relighting his cheroot, which in the stress of the emotional scenes recorded had gone out, he sank into his chair unhappily.

The half-hysterical outburst left Madeline plunged into quick and deep remorse.

"Oh, Ruth, Ruth!" she cried, clasping the weeping, frightened child in apologetic arms. "Forgive me! I would not hurt you for all the world!" She petted her. "There, there, there!"

She was trying, desperately, to quiet the child's sobs and dry her tears, each of which was a bitter charge against her in her soul. I know you did not mean to say disagreeable things. Come, now. Kiss me. Sister loves you! Sister *always will* love you!" She caught her in her arms and pressed her to her breast, filled, now, with a tumult of emotions, battling desperately.

Ruth, quick to forgive, understanding, vaguely, in her embryonic woman-soul that what had happened had not been a true expression of her sister's sentiments, sobbed desperately, but forgivingly.

"I—I—I—knun—knun—know you will." She snuggled up to her, much comforted. "Maybe it will—maybe it will jell af-fafter a while, Madeline."

"Yes, yes; maybe, Ruth. Yes; I'm *sure* it will."

Thus their mother, entering, to find what had become of Ruth and why Madeline had not answered the summons she had sent her to deliver, discovered the two sisters. Instantly she knew, of course, that something serious had happened.

"What is the trouble, now?" she asked, somewhat severely.

"Nothing, mother," Madeline replied evasively, and tried to smile.

"Are you sure? Look at Ruth's face. What is it, Ruth?" She was prepared, as mothers must be, to take her place as magistrate upon the bench in the solution of some unknown difficulty in the family.

Ruth rose bravely to the situation, gallant and whol-

ly loyal to her sister. "Why, we—we were just—fooling. Weren't we, Madeline?"

Madeline, glad to find the avenue of escape, quickly acquiesced. "Yes, little sister; we were just fooling." Kissing her again, she rose. "Now run along and watch the jelly. If it jells—come tell me."

Ruth, her spirits quite restored, skipped to the kitchen door, and, as she opened it, looked back and smiled at her.

"Women," said John, meditatively, as he puffed abstractedly at his cheroot, which, again, he had allowed to lose its fire, "are queer propositions. Damned if *I* understand 'em!"

Mrs. Sneed, calmed, but by no means satisfied, took up her work, but turned her eyes, from time to time, on Madeline, thus making her enormously uncomfortable.

"Now tell me all about it, my child," she said, presently.

Madeline, however, did not respond as usual to her mother's kindly urgings. Instead she sat back from the machine, her lips set rather tightly, and, with folded arms, kept stubborn silence—a stubborn or a puzzled silence.

Seeing this, her mother, worried, turned to Sneed. "What happened, father? Surely something has gone wrong." She was plainly worried by her daughter's silence, but not angered by it. Mary Sneed was very slow to anger; indeed she never yielded to it as the other members of the family occasionally did. She looked, now, benignantly, with not a harsh line in her

face, her eyes beaming through her steel-bowed spectacles the message of her wish to comfort.

"Something has gone wrong," she said again. "I can see it in her eyes. There is nothing she can conceal there. Come, what is it?"

Her husband did not answer her, but, with an uncomfortable look from face to face, appealed to Madeline. "You tell her, Madeline. Tell her what you just told me."

"What did you tell father, Madeline?" Her mother, as she spoke, took off her glasses, sat back in her chair and looked straight into her daughter's eyes.

Madeline summoned all her resolution. It would be harder, much, to make her complaint to her mother. She knew how deeply it would pain her. She had known that it would pain her father, but, somehow, one is always just a bit more ready to pain men than women. They get credit for less tender sensibilities. She had to summon something of defiance to her heart and voice before she could gain courage to respond.

"I said I was tired of being a drudge," she finally declared. "None of you seems to understand me. I'm sick of housework. I'm terribly sick of it."

Mary was not startled, to all seeming. Her face lost none, or very little, of its habitual placidity. Her answer was the very best which could possibly have been made.

"Yes, my child," she said, and gazed benignly over her big glasses. "I, too, feel something of that. I, too, lie weary upon my pillows—but still I am happy!

Where one idles a thousand must labor. Even so, Madeline, life has its blessings."

"What are they?" asked the girl, half skeptically, almost derisively. "Where are they? When do they come to *us*?"

"What are they?" said Mary Sneed. "They are our children, our hopes, our good deeds, our homes. Where are they? They are all about us, they are in our hearts, they are in the past, they are our memories. When do they come? When we are worthy to receive them, when we are prepared to care for them, when we are able to understand. Then and then only. Not before."

The unhappy girl slowly shook her head, skeptical that any would ever come to her; filled with youth's blackest cynicism. "And to some they never come," said she.

"To some they never come," her mother granted; "but *they* are unworthy."

John Sneed nodded. There were times when his wife almost swept him off his feet, times when by her mere presence and good wisdom he realized his own shortcomings, sorrowed for them, made resolutions to do better by her than he had done. though, in many ways, he had ever done his best.

"Right!" said he. "She's always right, Madeline."

"Cannot they be hastened?" Madeline inquired, looking at her mother with an anxious face as one who waits the utterances of an oracle—a face much changed from that of the wilful, passionate, discouraged girl of a few moments earlier.

"Patience, my child," said Mary; "they may be near us when we do not know. All in good time. Only God can tell."

She rose, kissed Madeline without another word, and left the room.

CHAPTER IX

ALVTOWN was much wrought up when on its dead walls and bill-boards appeared announcements that the Greatest Minstrel Show on Earth, which, the previous spring, had come no nearer to the place than Haverhill, was, early in the autumn season, to appear at Piper's Opera House. Everywhere the billboards were ablaze with that vast portrait which the man whom Dave had whipped had been in process of affixing to the memorable barn-door, when he had insulted Madeline. The troupe was enterprising beyond most, in that it sent an actual advance-agent to the small town, who furnished to the little local papers wondrous tales about the marvels of the burnt-cork artists' voices, dancing, what-not.

"Didn't you say, last spring, dad, after I had had that fight, that you knew Paul Churchill's father?"

"Yes, son; years ago I knew him. Knew him mighty well, too. He played in a band. The son must have picked winners from the start to get to be the main guy of a bunch like this they're advertising."

"You suppose he'll know you?"

"Know me? I never saw him. Memory of names and faces ain't among the things passed down from father to son, Dave. But he'll likely know *about* me. Ought to, I should think."

After this conversation it was with some excitement that Dave sought his father out in the small room behind the hotel office, which, unofficially, was headquarters of his party during the early days of the campaign. It was noon of the day when Churchill's minstrels would arrive, every small boy in the town was filled with wild excitement, and, here and there, before the taverns and more popular stores, the hitching-racks were crowded by tied teams from the country, almost as they would be on a circus day.

"What do you think, dad?" he exclaimed, plainly very much impressed by the importance of the news he bore. "I just saw George Piper and he said Paul Churchill and his minstrel troupe got in half an hour ago, and asked, the first thing, if John Sneed lived here in this jay town. He said his father knew you and had asked him to call on you when he came here."

"Hell!" said Sneed, delighted. "You don't say!"

"Sure. That's just what he said. And say, dad, he's going to lead the parade, this afternoon, with the silver cornet band and the whole troupe dressed in the swell mackintoshes and the plug hats. They'll go right by the house. Maybe he'd stop in, if you should ask him to. Maybe he'll give us some passes. Better have him stop. I'll take the message to him."

"Wouldn't it frost you?" Sneed exclaimed, admiringly. "We always used to think that Churchill's son wasn't much account, and now see what he's made out of himself! You wait. I'll give you a note to him. You take it right around, will you?"

"Will I?"

With great care the note was written—with great care and not a little worry, for Sneed did not feel certain just how to address a man so great as this, his friend's son, evidently had become.

"He's the whole cheese with the troupe," Dave commented, as his father wrote; "the best man in it, and he owns it. Some class, he is!"

"Shut up, can't you?" said his father. "You made me write in 'cheese' when I wanted to write 'stop.' 'Won't you cheese in when you parade our way?' Look nice, that would, to send him!"

Dave laughed uproariously until he saw that if he did not cease the note would not be written. Then he subsided into an excited silence. The idea of being able to consider a real minstrel man, the leader of a troupe, at that, a personal acquaintance, greatly pleased him. He rather thought he'd have it on the other fellows after that—he rather thought so!

"We'll see him first thing in the parade. He'll be the swell leader with the big stick. They say he's champion twirler of the world! Wears one of those bearskin toppers. Say, it'll just about kill Madeline, when he shows up—if he does. He's a cuckoo, you bet!"

"Sure he is," said Sneed, having with much care completed the invitation. "Take that around to his hotel and then we'll see what happens. If it's true he's been asking Piper about me, he'll sure answer it, so nobody will have the laugh on us. But don't be crowing round until we find out if he's really going to be sociable."

They went home for luncheon earlier than usual, and departed from the center of the town in such excitement that they forgot to study out the batteries for the day in the big leagues, or even note the racing-cards on the big tracks. Such a thing as that had not occurred before during the baseball and racing seasons since either of them could remember. Even when, walking side by side up-town (which was itself unusual), Dave recalled it to his father's mind, the old man did not comment on it very freely.

"Well, well!" he said, instead. "Churchill's son the head of that big show!"

They were passing, at the moment, a "twenty-four-sheet stand" of minstrel posters, which covered the whole face of the town's biggest billboard.

"Look at that eye on him!" Dave exclaimed, admiringly. "When the feller that I had the fight with quit putting up that poster he stopped just shy of that. Don't know's I'd have the nerve to fight if that eye'd been in sight."

"Takes after his father," Sneed agreed. "His father had an eye like that—just like an eagle's."

"Guess it'll frost their hair, some, when we get up to the house and tell 'em what sort of a caller they are likely goin' to have this afternoon." Dave laughed, delighted by the thought of the excitement their announcement would cause in the staid precincts of the home. A real, live minstrel, and the owner of the troupe, at that! Well, that would be going *some!*"

"May stir 'em up, a little."

All their anticipations of excitement in the home proved to have been meagre.

"Takes actors, don't it, to make a lot of skirts get fluttery?" said Dave, in commenting on it.

"And they're going right by here?" asked Ruth, incredulously.

"Sure, they are," said Sneed. "It'll be about the end of their parade. I've sent a note to him to ask him to come in."

"What? Come to *see* us?" Mrs. Sneed inquired, a bit aghast.

"Sure's you're a foot high," said her husband. "Why not come to see us?"

"Ruth, hurry, now, and pick up all these clippings that Dave left around the couch."

"Let him pick up his own clippings," Ruth said, rebelliously.

"Ruth, did you hear me?" her mother countered.

And there was no more demur.

"You'd better wear your muslin, Madeline," she said to her elder daughter.

"I'm going to. I've been up-stairs and laid it out. What can I do to help you, mother?"

"Have Dave put that machine in the spare bedroom and wind the clock," said Mrs. Sneed. "Nothing looks more shiftless than a big, stopped clock."

"How many passes do you think we can get, Dave?" Sneed speculated idly. "I'd kind of like to go to that show, myself."

Madeline, who had brightened wonderfully, looked

anxiously at Dave. "I want to go, too, Dave; I'm just dying to see the minstrel."

"Leave that to me," said Dave, with grandeur. "I'll soak him for the whole family."

"Gee!" Ruth cried, running to the window. "They must see 'em coming down the street. Deacon Jones got down, just now, and's standing by his horses' heads."

"Take some band to scare *that* team!" said Dave, and laughed.

"You ain't moved that machine," his mother warned him.

Without a word, without delay, without the help of anyone, he took it to the bedroom.

"Well, look at that!" said Ruth, amazed. "He never kicked and never asked a mite of help!"

"Oh, well," said Dave, almost shamefacedly, as he returned, "when there is something doing——"

From the distance, came the unmistakable sounds of martial music. Outside in the street the crowd stirred with delight. The deacon took a firmer hold upon his horses' bits, a procedure which seemed much to bore the ancient team. Miss Losee, the most inveterate of the town's gossips, who lived across the street, and was very rigid in her condemnation of the theatre and every other means of merry-making, ostentatiously appeared, and, from the outside, closed her house-blinds, then went in and slammed the door.

"She'll leave 'em so she can peek through," said Ruth.

"Sure," said Dave; "she'll glue her peepers to some hole and stare till she's bug-eyed."

"Where's my white vest, mother?" Sneed inquired, excitedly.

"Well, now," said Mrs. Sneed, "that vest of yours is in the wash. I didn't think you'd want it till next Sunday."

"Why on Sunday?" inquired Dave. "It's a hundred to one shot that he nor it will never see the inside of a church again. He ain't been, has he, since you two was married? When dad goes to church, next time, he won't see anything."

"Why?" asked Ruth.

"Because his eyes will be forever shut," said Dave. "Nothing but a funeral could get him into church again, and then nothing but his own funeral at that."

"You hush, Dave!" said Madeline. "You make my blood run cold."

"That music coming," said her father, not offended by Dave's joke, "makes mine warm up."

He paused, in his shirt-sleeves, listening. Then, suddenly, realizing that he had no coat on, he hastened to the corner closet and produced his best broadcloth.

"Here, Dave, help me on with this coat, and give me those other boots. Hurry up, too. Hand me my hat. How does my tie look?"

He glanced around him critically, and, by doing so, assumed a new rôle in that family—the rôle of one who demands neatness, order and propriety. It was almost startling. "Here, Ruth," said he; "take off

that gingham rag, and, mother, you get out of that apron."

They obeyed him with alacrity.

The music, now, was drawing near and in the street was much excitement. If Deacon Jones's team was, notwithstanding his plain panic and his firm grasp of their placid bits, enduring the approaching turmoil calmly, there were those among the unaccustomed country horses which were giving their drivers trouble. People could be seen, on both near side streets, running for the avenue of vantage. Mrs. Perkins hurried through the Sneed yard, waddling.

"Gee! She must have climbed the fence," said Dave, "and come cross-lots to save time."

"She didn't climb the fence," said Ruth; "she came through the back gate. She never could have climbed the fence. It would have broke. And—here they come!"

The blare of martial music was, indeed, at hand; the horses were exhibiting the worst there was in them; a toy-balloon man sprang from nowhere, as one always springs at moments of the sort in a small town. The minstrels were about to pass.

"You go out, Dave, and escort him in," said Sneed, "just as soon as they stop marching."

Dave vanished with amazing enterprise and speed.

"Do you really think he will come in?" asked Mrs. Sneed.

"Why, sure he will. Wasn't he inquiring all around the town for me?" her husband answered with much dignity.

"Well, if he does," said Madeline, "thank heaven! I'll get a glimpse of some one who wasn't born in Alvatown! I *do* hope he will!"

"They're right here, now; they're right here, now!" cried Ruth. "Ain't it great, Madeline?"

And there they were—not less than thirty of them, wonderfully spread to occupy the entire roadway, with a band which took ten of their number marching at their head. Such glittering silk hats they wore! Such wonderfully skirted coats! And every one of them was garbed in pearl-gray trousers and wore spats!

The music blared in loud crescendo; Madeline and her mother crowded at one window, holding back the hollyhocks so that they should not obstruct their view; and, at the other, Ruth gazed and exclaimed excitedly. Dave and his father crossed the little lawn and went to the front gate, afterwards, as the parade paused, approaching the great leader of the great parade out in the roadway.

"That's him—that's Mr. Churchill—with the tall fur hat on," Madeline exclaimed, in marvel.

"Ain't he fine looking, though," said Mrs. Sneed. "He must be full six feet!"

"And he's shaking hands with father!" Madeline exclaimed.

"And Dave, too" said Mrs. Sneed.

"Oh, they're coming in, they're coming in!" cried Ruth.

Indeed, the crowd without was gaping with amazement and reverently falling back as John and Dave

progressed toward the Sneed gate, with, between them, the magnificent drum-major, towering in his mighty hat, unnaturally broad-shouldered in his gold-laced coat of red, very martial, very graceful, in his blue-trouser legs. Small boys were shocked to silence by the honor thus done to a townsman, their elders looked on enviously at Sneed, the swarm of muslined beauties in the crowd sniffed enviously at the thought of Madeline's good fortune. Dave's rivals in the sporting world of Alvatown were filled with jealous indignation.

"They're comin' through the gate," said Ruth, wild with excitement. "They're comin' up the path—they're—they're goin' to come in, they're goin' to come in, they're goin' to come in!"

A moment later this tremendous thing had happened. The drum-major, wrapped in his magnificence, had entered, first, for John Sneed at the door had stood aside, holding the screen open for him, not obsequiously, but with overwhelming hospitality. Dave, beaming, stood behind him, and, on his tiptoes, got his face above the visitor's enormously high shoulder and winked frantically across it at the massed, abashed and welcoming women folks within. They were all eyes—Mrs. Sneed's almost as sparkling with excitement as Ruth's, Madeline's with not a trace of the dull weariness and discontent in them which had so dulled their luster of late weeks.

"Mary," said John, "this is Paul Churchill, whose father I have known for forty years."

Mrs. Sneed bowed handsomely and took the visit-

or's outstretched hand, smiling in response to a particularly charming smile from him. That same smile, not more artificial and no less, had made hearts flutter in a hundred theatres.

"Pleased, Mrs. Sneed," said Churchill.

"And this," said Sneed, "is my daughter Madeline."

The visitor, coming from the brilliant sunshine to the half-light of the room, dimmed by the shadows of the hollyhocks, had not, as he entered, had a chance to see her. Now he turned to her and the light from the open door behind him fell full upon her face and graceful, girlish, pleasantly maturing figure. The somewhat affected boredom of his manner vanished in a second. It was evident enough that he had had a strong, delightful, mental shock.

"Gee! did you see him set up and take notice when he swung his lamps to Madeline!" said Dave, afterwards, and thus very neatly told the story of the episode.

His "lamps" undoubtedly "lit up." Here, he reflected instantly, was an amazing village belle and there was about her that sweet, subtle charm of innocence which was missing from the faces of the vagrant beauties whom his life brought him most often into contact with. Shy, she was, undoubtedly, but not with uncouth country awkwardness; innocent she was, undoubtedly, but not with that of born stupidity.

"Miss Sneed!" said Churchill, bowing in his most impressive manner, which, too, to quote Dave's after-speeches, just once more, was "some impressive."

"And this," said John, now smiling very broadly,

delighted by the fact that this great stranger had accepted with consideration the unworthy favors he had had in his power to offer him, "is my youngest daughter, Ruth. Shake hands with Mr. Churchill, Ruth."

The child found it a delightful agony to go up to him and hold out her hand a little; and when he stooped and, with unheard of ease of manner, reached for it and took it cordially, she became his slave.

"And now sit down," said John. "Sit down. Marching is hot work, and you've been hustling overtime, a handling that—that——"

He did not know exactly what to call the emblem of supremacy which Paul had twirled there at the band's head.

"My baton?" said the young man, with the slightest hint of toleration. "Yes, it is fatiguing."

"Well, I'm glad to see you," John went on, looking at him with comfortable, hospitable admiration. "By Jove, you look like your dad."

Churchill still held his vast headgear in his hands, steadying its great bulk between his brilliant knees.

"Say, put that blooming hat down, somewhere," John suggested, "and take your coat off, if you want to." He reached forward, and, somewhat gingerly, took the hat from the impressive minstrel's hands. "Here, Madeline, take care of this thing."

Madeline advanced, her face flushed with a pleasure of embarrassment, and, smiling, took the mighty chapeau.

"Oh, Miss Sneed," said Paul, with an elaborated courtesy which he affected with success in ladies'

presence, "don't bother." But she had the great hat in her hands. "Just set it down, somewhere," he urged. "Really, it isn't half so important as it looks."

"Isn't it heavy!" Madeline exclaimed, and smiled at him. She stood there with the shako in her arms, caressing it. "And how soft and beautiful the fur is!"

Their eyes met, hers shy and furtive, but delighted; his not less delighted, but not shy—big, of the sort called by maiden ladies "beautiful" in babies, rarely found in men except among those who have posed and ogled on the stage, to whom, invariably, they make an asset worth considering. Very large they were, and brown—deep brown; and the shadows under them were well defined enough to have been pencilled, but they were not. These eyes were very useful when he sang sentimental ballads. They thrilled Madeline—thrilled her to her finger and her toe tips.

CHAPTER X

“**W**ELL,” said Dave, looking with enormous satisfaction at the distinguished visitor, “this is going along some, I guess.”

Churchill still held his gaudy baton, the stick of precious woods, inlaid, and its glittering ball, big as a musk-melon and polished to the last degree of scintillation, between his knees and in a crooked elbow.

It controlled Dave’s eye as firmly as a glittering bauble holds a baby’s. “Say, Mr. Churchill, let me hold the stick. Ain’t it a beaut?”

With a somewhat condescending smile Churchill placed the sceptre of his grandeur as drum-major of the minstrel band in Dave’s outstretched hands. The boy fondled it, examining each inch of it; then he essayed a movement as if about to try to twirl it.

“Now be careful, Dave,” his father worried, more to make talk than because the worry was acute. “You’ll drop that.”

Dave looked at him with just a hint of exasperation in his glance.

“Better set it in the corner,” Sneed persisted; and Dave, warned by the thought that, possibly, he *might* drop it, if he did not, and most unwilling to have any episode not pleasant occur to mar this sensation-

ally pleasurable visit, did as he was told, for once, without a grumble.

"While you're about it," said his father, "go down cellar and get a pitcher of cider." He turned hospitably to Paul. "You'll have a little refreshment, won't you, Mr. Churchill?"

"Yes, do," said Mrs. Sneed. The whole wide-eyed family was anxious to do homage by the way of hospitality to this extremely brilliant and attractive alien.

"No, I thank you. I'll be going along in a few moments. My men are resting out there, you understand, while I'm in here. I mustn't keep them long. I just dropped in to pay my respects and to invite you and your family to the performance, to-night."

The smile on Sneed's face broadened and that on David's became a grin. Ruth was delighted to the point of demonstration. Madeline flushed with pleasure and even Mrs. Sneed was very evidently pleased. Churchill saw these things and swelled in their fine influence. Nothing quite so magnifies the small man as the ability to dispense favors.

With continually posed fingers he unbuttoned his gold-braided coat. His movement as he drew the little pass-pad out of an inside pocket had a suggestion of the flourish in it—not enough to overdo it, just enough to give Ruth food for thought that he was "grand," make Madeline (comparing him with simply-moving Alvatowners) assure herself that he was "graceful," and make Dave and even John a bit uncomfortable because his manners were so "easy."

Having secured the pad the wonderful young man looked with calm, hospitable smile about the room. Dave thought he was inquiring, mutely, for the where-withal with which to write.

"Here's a pencil," he said, hurriedly.

Churchill smiled at him a little tolerantly. "No, I thank you," he replied. "We generally write passes in ink. I have a fountain pen."

With another little flourish he produced one from the upper pocket of his vest, thrusting his hand, this time, through a small opening which he had left in his bewildering coat by allowing one brass button to remain unfastened.

"I was counting," he said, smiling. "Ah, there are five in the family." Then, with a little smile, to Mrs. Sneed. "And what a charming family!"

Now he bent above the pad which rested on his knee and, after having dabbed the pen into the air to start the ink out toward its nibs, prepared to write. Suddenly he paused and looked up, straight into the eyes of Madeline. As were the others, she had been observing him with intense attention. She flushed as his glance linked into hers and held it.

"By the way, Miss Madeline," he said, with an ease for which poor Ted Franklin would gladly have exchanged ten years of his life, "haven't you some young gentlemen friends whom you would like to include in the party?"

For the first time in his life John Sneed was rather glad that Madeline had scorned the youth of Alva-town. They suddenly appeared to him, as, one by one,

they flashed into his mind, as (now that he had seen Paul Churchill) incredibly unworthy of her smiles or her approval.

She answered the polite young minstrel with an air, almost, of wonderment. Such generosity! Then, speaking somewhat disjointedly, partly in embarrassment, partly in the strength of her desire that he—this wonderful person from the great world beyond Alvatown—should understand that with the uncouth youth of that same Alvatown she could have no social dealings of an intimacy which would include an invitation to a family festival of this sort.

"No, thank you," she replied. "There's no one in *this* town I care anything about. I'll be there, myself, though . . . I'm very much obliged to you."

Again his disconcerting but delightful eyes caught hers and held them for a thrilling second. Then he finished writing on the pad and tore off the little square of paper, handing it to John, who fumbled as he took it.

"Well, there's a box," said he. "I shall expect the whole family."

There was a grateful chorus.

"Possibly, between acts, I may visit you," he said, and smiled with cordial condescension.

This thought was tremendous. Madeline almost gasped with wonder at the prospect. "Yes——" she began.

Sneed threatened gaily. "Well, you'd better, young man, or there'll be trouble!"

This delighted Dave. The old man *was* rising to

the occasion! Here he was, as easy with this personage, as——

"Well, listen to him!" he said to Paul. "Just eats it up!"

Mrs. Sneed, too, was impressed. "That will be very kind of you," she said.

She was the only one in all the family whose manner had remained quite prim throughout the talk with the delightful and impressive visitor.

"Mama," Ruth inquired, "am I going, too?" She had not caught quite all the conversation and was filled with a real agony of anxiety. Would she be left out of this wonderful occasion? So many things were for the grown-ups and did not include girls of her age!

Paul, at whose side she stood, changing feet in her uneasiness, placed upon her head a fatherly hand. She looked up at him startled. Her eyes had been upon her mother's face. But she did not wriggle out from underneath the hand.

"Certainly, my child," he said, assuringly. "One of those seats is all yours. And when you see me on the stage I want you to be sure to clap hard."

He smiled at her benignantly, as if it went, of course, without saying, that all the world, whenever it saw him on the stage, applauded with great vigor. It was a favor to her to make this suggestion.

Ruth sidled from him slightly and reached towards Madeline, without once looking from his face, however. Madeline held out her hand, and Ruth grasped it.

"Surely I will," she said to Churchill, bravely. Then, unable to endure the glory of his smile, she fled to Madeline. "We'll both clap when we see him, won't we, sister?"

Madeline, with an effort, had quite regained composure. Her smile, now, was self-possessed, but she kept her eyes from direct contact with those of their hypnotic visitor.

"Yes; we will both applaud," said she.

Then, quite involuntarily, her eyes caught Churchill's and held there for a second. In a flash she had glanced down, but, long after the exchange of looks was over, she was conscious of a picture of his bold, pleasant eyes floating in her vision, as if it had been caught on some retentive mirror in her optical machinery. Almost unconsciously she stroked the bear-skin hat which she still guarded.

"Say, mother," Sneed suggested, "how would it do for Mr. Churchill to come home with us, to-night, after the show, and have a chicken-pie? One of those old-fashioned chicken pies. Eh? What?"

The prospect did not, in the least, displease the visitor, but he felt it incumbent on himself to deprecate it politely. "Oh, I say, Mr. Sneed," he protested, "that's going too fast with me!"

"Why, no," the hospitable Mary interjected. "It will be the greatest pleasure. We will be delighted to have you."

Now the minstrel turned to Madeline, with open, gallant smile. "Do you think I'd better?" he asked, gaily.

"I do, I do," she said, filled with delightful boldness. "Will you? That will be perfectly splendid!"

"The ayes have it," Dave commented, not less pleased than all the rest. "Motion passed unanimously." Then, with a wink: "And, thank God, there won't be any ham in it!"

This passed without comment in the general excitement. Madeline almost failed to notice it, Sneed did not notice it at all, and Mrs. Sneed was busy answering Ruth, who was begging to be allowed to sit up.

"A little while," her mother granted.

"But you can't have any pie," Dave teased. "It's unhealthy for kids to gormandize after sunset. Ain't that right, dad?"

"A fat chance she'll have, with you at the table!" said his father.

This brought important matters to Dave's mind, and he spoke, partly with regret, partly with conceit, claiming importance subtly. "Wait a minute. Back up! She can have all my chicken pie. I can't be in attendance. I've got to go to the Ozark Billiard Rooms after the show. Steve Weldon is going to play in the new pool tournament and if I ain't there to give him luck he'll fall down."

"You're excused," said Sneed, good-naturedly. "Motion passed unanimously."

David now bethought him of his manners. What if Churchill should consider himself slighted? "Say, you won't feel sore if I don't show up, will you?"

"Certainly not, old chap. But I'll see you at the performance."

"Will you? Well, I guess yes! I'll be there with the joy rags on and a cravat that sells in the open market at a dollar a throw."

Dave could see, he thought, that he had made a deep impression on the visitor by his ease of manner and the up-to-dateness of his conversation. It gave him a great deal of satisfaction. Now he suddenly be-thought him that his dog remained away.

"Oh, say," he added, "if you're goin' around town, this afternoon, and see a dog that answers to the name of Roosevelt just pinch him off. He's mine."

"Did you lose him?"

"I never know just whether he is lost, or not. Maybe he has found an affinity."

"What's an affinity, Dave?" Ruth asked.

Here was another chance to make a deep impression on this visitor from the great, gay world outside, and Dave seized it with avidity. He wished to make it clear that he was even with the minute in his knowledge of affairs.

"An affinity," he said, "is a young lady who don't know just where she's going to have her mail forwarded."

To his amazement no one laughed and John looked at him hard. He had plainly put his foot in it, instead of doing something clever. It annoyed him and he rose a little sooner than he would have, had it not been for the unfortunate witticism, to leave the room.

"Well," he said lightly to the visitor, determined

that he should not see he was abashed, "you'll be on hand for the chicken-pie, anyhow."

"You may be sure of it," Paul called after him.

A moment later Dave, to his delight, stepped out into the midst of curious and envious folk who lingered by the fortunate gate which had admitted the great man to the Sneed yard, to gaze at the still more fortunate house which for the moment harbored him, and envy the incredibly, unwarrantably honored family which now, within, was privileged to talk with him.


"Say; is he in there, yet?" a breathless, small boy asked.

"Why, sure he's in there," Dave replied. "Why wouldn't he be in there? Is there any other place for any one with class to go in Alvatown? Nit, not."

He walked on, still whistling, now and then, for Roosevelt. Just as he was passing the Jones team the band, which, in broken ranks, had been waiting for its leader, formed again, and suddenly emitted a great bray of brass and crash of drums and cymbals. The sleepy animals, who had endured its gradual approach without much protest, were startled by the suddenness of this disturbance and one of them reared. Dave sprang back in just the nick of time.

"You should never," he said to the nervous deacon, after he had sprung again to guard their heads, "let a horse of yours reach out like that and step on a gent's shirt-bosom. It's sure to soil it."

With this sally, which delighted every one except the deacon, he started on; but had gone but a step or



two when he discovered that he had left his best silk handkerchief at home.

The blare of music changed things in the house, also. It aroused Paul to the fact that he was staying in the unexpected light of this extraordinary village beauty's eyes much longer and with greater satisfaction than he had dreamed of, when he came, and that the time had arrived when he must start again upon the business of displaying his trim form and perfectly made uniform, astonish all beholders by the twirling of his baton, look haughtily upon the men who watched, smile covertly at the wondering, admiring country girls, and, generally, resume his place as the executive and decorative head of the great minstrel troupe which, that evening, would exhibit at the Op'ra House.

"I shall be sure to come, this evening," he said to Mrs. Sneed, as he prepared to leave. "Thank you for asking me."

The family withdrew to the front door and the windows and gazed in rapture at the troupe.

The band began to tune up. Paul stepped lightly to Madeline's side. "They've formed and I must go and lead the way," he said, with a gay, condescending smile. He held his hand out to her and she took it. "Of course I shall see you again, to-night. I really must, you know," he told her in a confidential voice, still smiling.

The length of time he held her hand embarrassed her a little; his persistent glances worried and bewildered her while pleasing her. She wondered what

the family would think of what seemed to her his most conspicuous attentions, but a shy glance about showed her that they were all broadly smiling.

"Surely you will," she answered. Then, acknowledging the courtship which had plainly sprung into his bold eyes, confused by it, vaguely worried by it, but not at all resenting it: "But we haven't known each other *very* long, have we?"

"That's nothing," he said softly, laughing. "Our fathers have been friends for forty years. Why not you and I?"

He was delightful. She responded to his gayety. "For forty years?" she asked, archly.

He smiled straight into her eyes. "Possibly, in time; who knows?"

Sneed chanced to turn and saw them. There was something in their attitude, their eyes, their varying expressions, which informed him, and he was delighted. Here was this young man, distinctly prosperous, the son of an old friend, the "real thing," as he might have put it. Madeline was discontented. If they took to one another—well, why not? He turned his gaze upon his wife and winked at her, but she did not catch it.

"Good-bye!" said Madeline.

Paul pressed her hand. "I'm off," said he. "Now don't forget—to-night. Here, the hat. You put it on; will you?"

She shrank from the task, a little, and yet was delighted by her opportunity to serve him. It was not so very heavy—that great hat—despite its mighty

size. She blushed rosy red, but a shy glance told her that she had the approval of her parents, and she proceeded, boldly, to lift the shako to its place as he bowed to receive it. As he raised his head a delicious look of understanding sped from his eyes to hers and she replied to it, she knew, although she did not know just how. A moment later and, magnificent, he was standing in the door, his baton at salute. He waved it, bowed, so that the hat would pass beneath the lintel, and was gone.

The others of the family rushed from the house to see the minstrels start, again, in their parade, and to receive the envious glances of the townspeople, who would have seen the great man coming from their door. But Madeline did not go out of doors. She hurried to a window, and, with wildly beating heart, kept her eyes fixed on Paul's tall figure till a tree concealed it as he went off down the street.

To her amazement, as she turned away, David appeared just outside the window. "Forgot something," he explained. "Say, Madeline, does that chap look good to you?"

CHAPTER XI

A GLORIOUS night; cool, bright with the white radiance of a full, full moon; sweet with the autumn scents of harvests and burning brush. Alvatown was much excited. It was not often that so big a show as Churchill's Minstrels stopped there, even for a night. It was prayer-meeting evening, and there would have been some excitement, any way; but now prayer-meetings were very largely forgotten or ignored. The Methodist and Baptist managed to collect enough old people, each, for a sort of half-way service, but the Unitarian saw, as David put it, the handwriting on the billboards and definitely gave the meeting up entirely. It was the first time in two years that the Unitarian had been quite dark on Wednesday evening, the last time preceding having been in the winter, when the furnace wouldn't work and the thermometer was hovering in the neighborhood of zero. It was a bad night for the churches and for everything but Churchill's Minstrels except the pool tournament. That didn't need a crowd; it only needed players, and, as the players principally needed were Steve Weldon and Dave Sneed, and as they postponed their playing until after the show, it did not suffer.

But these things, really, were of small importance. The important things were those which happened at

the Sneed home after dinner, when John Sneed trussed himself up in his best broadcloth coat, as carefully as if it were a political convention which he planned to attend, when Mary Sneed got out her old, stiff, out-of-date but very creaky seal-brown silk with dark blue facings, when Ruth was decked out in "her white" which her slim growing legs made look a little like an inverted daisy on a double stem, but which was pretty because of its extraordinary wealth of ribbons, and when Madeline arrayed herself in all the simple, girlish glory of her "muslin."

And this really was glory, too, although the glory was not an attribute of the dress, but of the wearer; it was her youth's, her animation's, her light heart's.

It was astonishing how that heart had lost its weight of woe and discontentment during the short hours between the first toot of the minstrel band, heard at the Sneed house, and the hour when, smiling, blushing, just a little tremulous, with eyes big with anticipation, with her white, splendid throat which was swallowing hard, at times, to keep the excitement down, she started with her mother and her father and with little Ruth for Piper's Op'ra House to see the Minstrel.

"Got 'em all out, pretty much, ain't he," John Sneed said, complacently, as they approached the Op'ra House. "I tell you, Paul's a slick one. He knows how to advertise—what with his picture, and the notices in all the newspapers and the parade. Religion ain't so enterprising. The prayer-meetings ain't running one, two, three." He laughed. "They don't get

enough publicity. Now a big billboard covered with old Parson Simpson and some nice, hot pictures of the hell he preaches——”

“Father!” said Madeline, much shocked, and he subsided, chuckling.

“Slick chap, Paul is,” he added, later, in the lobby of the Op’ra House, speaking so that every one might hear him.

Inasmuch as, already, the tale had spread all over town that the leader of the Minstrels had, that afternoon, actually stopped his parade while he visited the Sneed home, every one who heard was properly impressed by his acquaintance with the celebrated man. No one questioned his full right to call him “Paul,” familiarly.

“Yes, sir; they’re reg’lar friends,” he heard a big-eyed youth remark, as they passed by, “and that’s no dream. He *stopped* there, Churchill did—and went *in*—yes, sir; he did, and stayed an hour. An’ Dave Sneed, he was saying——”

John would gladly have lingered in the lobby to hear more of this delightful talk, but the crowd entering had too great an impetus. He and his family party were swept on, willy nilly, almost, into the brass-railed gap which led up to the ticket-taker’s box, where, with a flourish, he held out the pass, and had a nod, not only from the ticket-taker, but from the long-coated and silk-hatted representative of the minstrel troupe, who stood watching to see that not too many dead-heads were passed in, by the ideal manager.

Once within the theatre it gave Madeline a certain

not too subtle satisfaction to find that Percy Deane was the usher to conduct them to their places. His eyes bulged when John handed him the coupons.

"Why, it's a bub-bub-box!" he said, and stared.

"Of course it is a box," said Sneed, and smiled at him quite friendlily, even if, for the moment, he was nothing but an usher; "Mr. Churchill said, when he gave that box to me, to be certain to come early and I guess we're in good time."

Percy did not even try to force his tongue to make reply. He simply took the coupons, stared at them a minute and then led the way without a word, but with a very humble bow as Madeline brushed by him in the narrow little aisle over close against the wall.

"I bet the dud-dud-dud-damned minstrel man don't stutter!" he thought bitterly, as he left them.

"Guess some folks are staring some, eh, Madeline?" said John Sneed, genially, as they took their places in the chairs—satin-covered and not fastened down, at all, the way the leather-covered seats out on the main floor were. "You and mother sit down in the front. I'll take this chair back here."

"Oh, I want to sit down front," said Ruth.

"Sure; there's three chairs there. We could have brought two other folks. There's five in all."

In all her lifetime Madeline had never sat in a theatre box before, and, at first, the elevation of her place above the "parquette" worried her a little. She felt that every eye in the whole audience was turned on her, and she was certain, though she would not look, that the Brown girls, of whom she had caught

just a glimpse as she went in, had opera-glasses which they levelled at her, now and then, and then turned, gossiping, to one another.

"Are the Brown girls looking at us with their op'ra glasses?" she inquired of Sneed, who was gazing boldly round and bowing patronizingly to friends among the *hoi polloi*. "You look. They're over there. I don't want to look, myself."

"What if they are?" said he, with mighty satisfaction. "I guess you're *worth* looking at. There ain't another girl in here to-night can hold a candle to you, Madeline."

He did not often pay her compliments and she smiled up at him, blushing as delightfully as if he had been a young lover. How many nice things had happened during the last few hours!

"I don't suppose it's vanity for us to sit here," Mrs. Sneed debated.

"No, ma; Paul he wanted that the house should look good in the boxes just the same as on the stage. So after he saw you he fixed to plant you here, just for an ornament. It ain't your fault." Sneed laughed, in high good-nature.

"Bang!" went the big drum in the orchestra, and, immediately, came the other musicians through the little door beneath the stage.

"Look, Madeline," said Ruth, "they're coming from the cellar." She was very much excited. She had not been in the Op'ra House before.

A few moments afterward the curtain rose, and the brilliance of the stage, so near at hand, almost blinded

all of them for a full minute. Then Madeline saw Paul's greatness openly exemplified again. He had led the band, that afternoon, now he was sitting in the very center of the stage, on a high chair, with a carved back, very handsome with his somewhat pallid face and very carefully combed hair, in evening clothes, across the broad white shirt-bosom of which a bright ribbon stretched. She did not know just what the ribbon meant, but she had seen pictures, somewhere, of European noblemen who wore ribbons that way, and she wondered, not incredulously, if, sometime, he might not have been in foreign courts and been created a Grand Duke. He was handsome enough to be one, she reflected. Her eyes were fixed on him so firmly that she was startled when a black-faced man, dressed in an old, funny suit, wearing a red wig, and with his droll face so painted that his lips seemed very thick, and sitting in a chair close to the box, smashed a tambourine hard down upon his knee and started to scream "Well!" in diminishing crescendo.

"Whuh-whuh-whuh-whuh-why am it, Mistuh Churchill" (this man stuttered, it appeared, almost as much as Percy Deane did) "that a chuck-chuck-chicken goes acrost th' road, suh?"

Paul looked at him politely, more politely, Ruth thought, than such a very ugly colored man deserved. "I don't know, Mr. Tambo," he replied, smiling, as if with good-natured tolerance. "Why does a chicken go across the road?"

"Buh-buh-because he cannot—cannot go around it,

suh," said Mr. Tambo, and everybody laughed, Ruth very wildly.

"Oh, Madeline, I heard that same conundrum, long ago, in school!" she whispered, delighted, as one ought to be by meeting an old friend.

"So did I" said Sneed, "the first day I ever *went* to school."

"Mr. Churchill thinks it's funny," Ruth said, wondering. "Just watch him laugh!"

"That's a handsome girl I saw you walking with this afternoon," said Paul, to another funny darkey who sat across the stage from the Sneed box, "a handsome girl."

Madeline vaguely wondered what girl such a looking man could possibly have found in Alvatown to walk with him, and then remembered, with amusement at her own expense, that, of course, none of this was real; that he probably had not walked with any girl. It was all a part of the show.

"What guhl, Mr. Churchill, what guhl?" said the man whom he called Mr. Bones.

"That girl I saw you walking with, this afternoon. She's a sweet kisser."

"A sweet kissuh, suh, is she?" said Mr. Bones, indignantly, and Madeline was vaguely disturbed. "A sweet kissuh, suh? How do you know that, suh, Mistuh Churchill?"

"I had it from her own lips," Paul replied, and once again the audience roared loud with laughter.

A little jealous thrill shot through Madeline. She had wondered if he kissed many girls before she

forced herself again to recollect that all this was the show—that Mr. Bones had not walked with a girl that afternoon, and that Paul was merely joking when he said that he had kissed one. It was hard for her to get the quite impersonal viewpoint, and she did not like this portion of the show, so very well, because it consisted, principally, of jokes bandied between Paul and one or the other of the men in the curved line of chairs, almost every one of which had something in it about girls, or wives or mothers-in-law. But what was it, could it possibly be, to her, even if he did kiss girls and say rude things about women to make people laugh? She brought herself up with a round turn, just as the curtain fell and Dave came in, to sit down by his father, a little in the background.

"I got a pass for Steve, too," he whispered to his father.


"How?" asked Sneed.

"Sent a note around to Churchill."

"One of the things you've got to learn," said Sneed, a little angrily, "is not to ride a free horse to death."

"Oh, he said he was real glad to do a favor for any of my friends," Dave answered. "Maybe I ain't ace-high, now, with Steve!"

Madeline enjoyed the other portions of the show much better than she had the first part. The dancing was delightful. It was wonderful the way the men rat-tatted with the wooden soles of their shoes in such perfect time to such fast music. It must be harder, she opined, to learn to dance such steps than it was, even to get the long swing of the "Newport,"



the fancy, languorous waltz which, that season, was stirring the youth of Alvatown down at the dancing-school. And she liked the singing, even better than she did the dancing.

When the little man stepped to the front of the stage and started "Sally in Our Alley," it was heavenly! She had never heard the fine old song, before, and wondered if it was the very newest thing in Springfield and New York. If it was, she certainly was impressed by Springfield's and New York's good taste. It was so much better than the comic songs that every one in Alvatown was singing. And what a wondrous voice the little fellow had! This wasn't very much like Percy Deane and his "Tavern in Our Town" experiments—Percy's singing always was experimental. When the others, as he ended, all put their heads together in a compact group and repeated the whole chorus in rich chords, very softly, it just *thrilled* you.

Even John was stirred. "Some *singing!*" he exclaimed, with a long breath, after it had ended and the house had ceased its long roll of applause.

"You bet!" Dave answered. "That's *class*, that is!"

It was immediately afterwards, while two men were doing tricks with hats and things, that a small door in the wall of the box next the stage opened suddenly and who should stand revealed in it but Paul, himself. He was handsomer, thought Madeline, in the glory of his full dress suit with the wide ribbon stretched across his shirt-front than he had been, even, in his fine uniform, that afternoon. She had ceased

to think of him, at all, as Mr. Churchill," she only thought of him as "Paul."

How the audience sat staring as he stepped down into the box, not at all afraid that folks would see him do them honor, and shook hands with them, all around, bowing very low and very slowly above Made-line's slim fingers.

She wondered, for a minute, if he was not about to kiss them as she had seen fingers kissed in sweet romantic plays upon the stage in that same Opera House. She could hear the gasps all through the house as he took one of the empty chairs—with his face straight toward the audience, so that no one could mistake, for a single minute, just exactly who he was. And he paid not the least attention to his men upon the stage, performing; he talked there to the Sneeds as if it didn't matter in the least how much of the show he missed; as if he thought to talk with them was far more interesting than it could be to watch his actors. Of course she did not, really, suppose, that he cared, much, about seeing his own show—he probably had seen most of it from the front seats and behind the scenes, but, still——

She felt certain that the Brown girls, one or the other of them, had their op'ra glasses turned upon them every minute he was in there, and when, with a quick cocking of his ear stageward, he said, hurriedly: "Oh, pshaw! That's my cue! I must go back from fairyland to my night's work," and left them, she felt, somehow, all wonderful and happy.

It was a few minutes later that the greatest thing

of all the evening happened, though. He came down to the stage-front, very gracefully and slowly, while the orchestra played deep, sweet chords.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in his rich, thrilling voice, "I will now endeavor to render for you a sweet ballad which is all the rage, this fall, in New York, Chicago and the capitals of Europe. It is entitled 'Promise Me' and will be sung, this winter, only, by the most famous singers. I have obtained the singing rights, to give you pleasure, at a great expense, and the orchestra which travels with this company has been especially trained to its rendition."

This was, now, in the middle of the last part of the entertainment, and Madeline began to feel regret that all this thrilling joy was so soon to be finished; began to wonder if her life, upon the morrow, when he should have gone, would not be emptier and duller than it had ever been before. She felt strong, anticipatory sadness, and she all choked up when he turned his big eyes straight on her, without the least attempt to keep the house from knowing just exactly whom he looked at; she saw that his face drooped with sadness, as if he, too, was thinking of the morrow when he would be far away. She wondered if he could be.

And what came then! Ah, all that he had said about the song was true, was true, was true! It thrilled her through and through and made her shrink and shiver. "All the rage," he had declared, "in New York, Chicago and the capitals of Europe!" Well it might be. What a song, oh, what a song!

What the chorus had accomplished when the little

man sang "Sally in Our Alley" was nothing to what it did, now, after Paul had, as every one supposed, quite finished "Promise Me." It came as a complete surprise, so artfully was it arranged. As he turned away the orchestra began the chorus over, very softly, and the whole company took up the words in low, almost inarticulate, harmonies, to form a deep, fine, never dominant but always helpful accompaniment to his own repetition of the words in a soft, thrilling, perfectly controlled voice. It brought the tears, suddenly, to her eyes; it made her throat choke more than ever; it filled her whole soul with a sad, sweet longing for she knew not what.

When, as he finished, the curtain came down slowly, while the lights were low, it seemed to her as if the sun were setting peacefully on all the world and that she must, of course, wake up to find herself in heaven itself, a sad, very lovely sort of heaven. Never had she known a moment so delicious.

And the quick rise of the curtain afterwards upon a brilliant stage, with every member of the company upon it rollicking and laughing in a mad, loud negro song and dance, did not detract at all from her enjoyment of the moment which had passed. It had been superb.

This wild hilarity completed the long show. After five short minutes of it, the curtain fell for good, and, as the orchestra banged, whanged, wheezed, tooted, whistled and crashed, the audience rose from its seats. All was confusion. Every one was saying what a splendid show it had been, how they were sorry to

have missed prayer-meeting, but how this, you know—and all that sort of thing. She was surrounded, as they stepped from the box, by a wild, giggling group of girls of her own age, and a bashful, half-resentful ring of local youths, the girls guying her good-naturedly and enviously, and the young men trying not to be too bitter. Every one had seen that Paul had sung that great song, "Promise Me," right straight at her and every one was telling her about it.

"Why," said Milly Radcliffe, "I was afraid he'd go right over to that box and eat you with them eyes o' his! Say, such eyes—oh, mama! Madeline, you better had look out!"

Her father, as they stood out in the lobby, waiting for the crowd to filter through the narrow exit, told wondering acquaintances very pompously about his friendship for the great star's father and how the star himself had spent a good part of an hour with them, that afternoon, and how they were to wait there in the lobby for him, so that he could go home with them to have supper.

Quite a number of people, filled with shameless curiosity, lingered in the lobby or hung around before the dark store-fronts, outside, to see if it was really true that the actor was to go home with them, and it gave Madeline endless satisfaction to have him hurry from the body of the theatre (all dark, now, except upon the stage, where men were busy packing trunks) and meet them cordially.

She could hear the gasps, and the repetitions of "Oh, there he is! He's right there with them, Church-

ill is!" of the spying folk as they walked by, Ruth and her parents in advance, and she, her arm linked tight in Paul's—she called him "Paul," now, in her heart, instead of "Mr. Churchill"—quite oblivious of them when that was possible, bowing graciously when, tit-titering, they pushed each other out into her course and Paul's, along the short stretch of stone pavement that had been laid before the Op'ra House and the Hotel and then on the plank sidewalk that did duty further on.

That walk homeward—it was wonderful! Whenever they were in deep shadow, he pressed his elbow to his side and held her hand, which rested on it, as close as possible; but, as soon as they had left the business center of the town he whispered to her that he'd rather take *her* arm. She made no demur and thus they walked. The way he held her elbow in the cup made by his palm, at times, was really delicious.

"It seems so much more friendly, somehow," he said, smiling down on her in the bright moonlight from his fine height.

And it did seem very friendly, for he pressed her arm quite boldly, and, before they reached the house, where the trees hung wide across the sidewalk and threw deep, dense shadows, he let his fingers slip out to her hand, and, for a time, they walked thus, she pulling her fingers back just a trifle, but never quite away. Just before they reached the gate she gave him one answering pressure.

Then her father turned and held the gate wide open for the guest to pass.

"Well," John said, "that walk just sharpened up my appetite for some of mother's chicken-pie. How about you, Paul? Think you can eat a bite or two?"

CHAPTER XII

A CERTAIN haze of romance, that night, delightfully shrouded everything to Madeline. It amazed her to find Paul, whom she knew, of course, must be accustomed to grand living in hotels and the houses of rich friends in the great cities of the world, accepting the meagre comforts of their home with such pleasant satisfaction.

"Step right in and make yourself to home," her father said to him, as he drew back to let him enter first, after her mother, who had gone in in advance to turn up the lamps.

And Paul, demurring, but forcing her in first, had, when he entered, drawn a fine long sigh and said in that deep, hearty voice of his, so musically and earnestly: "Well, *this* is something *like!* *Here's* what I call *comfort!*"

He was not contemptuous of their poor things, at all!

It was marvellous, the delightful interest he showed in all the little matters they discussed. He and Ruth became so friendly in a minute, almost, that the child, usually shy with strangers, would not leave his side and stood there, with his arm around her, drinking in his every word wide-eyed, and snarling every time it

was suggested to her that, because it was half after eleven, little girls should go to bed.

"It's *home*, that's what it is, that really *counts*," said Paul.

Could it be possible that such a home as this, against which she sometimes bitterly revolted, could make appeal to him?

"Well, I don't know," her father countered, "as it's '*home*' so much as it is *folks*."

Paul laughed good-naturedly. "That's it, of course," said he, and looked at her. "Any old place where I hung up my hat would seem like home to me if certain *folks* were there. It's *folks*, of course."

And Madeline knew, deep in her heart, and thrilled with the fine knowledge, that he really meant that anywhere where *she* might be would seem like home to him! It was incredible!

She went about the task of helping her mother prepare the supper with a light, astonished heart—light because Paul Churchill watched and smiled, now and then, as she fluttered here and there upon her tasks, surprised because it could be light. She felt that she had never been so happy. She even wished that Dave were there, and frowned at thought of the pool-tournament which kept him from the family on the occasion of this festival. Maybe—maybe some day Paul might use his influence for good, with Dave, and make him settle down, the way he had told her he had settled down in habits, despite the roving life which his profession made him lead.

And the fine way he enjoyed the chicken-pie and

cakes and the preserves and cider pleased her. By the time the feast was finished she was in a glow of happiness such as she could not remember ever to have known before.

At last, when almost the final scrap had been disposed of except the portion on the plate which Ruth, eager-eared and slow-eating, on this, for her, unparalleled occasion, held in her lap as she sat upon the couch, John pushed back his chair, smoothed the napkin on his knee, deposited his plate upon the table, leaned back with an air of comfort and lighted a cheroot. At the same time his wife rose, and, going to the visitor, took his empty plate and smiled at him, delighted that its emptiness showed appreciation of her handiwork.

"Well," said Sneed, "was it or wasn't it? Tell me."

"The finest I ever tasted," said the minstrel-man. "A wonder." He smiled at Madeline. "Pies like that are the kind that mother used to *try* to make."

"Thought you'd like it," said Sneed, nodding. "Mother can make 'em with her eyes shut."

Mrs. Sneed was standing in the lamp-light by the table, stacking the used dishes. That this praise pleased her none who saw the look upon her face could possibly have doubted.

"Mrs. Sneed," said the visitor, "I've done as much touring around as the next man, and that chicken-pie, believe me, beats anything I ever saw. I've tried them down South, up North, and from Portland to Seattle, but that particular pie——"

Words evidently failed him for the moment, for, with a gesture of supreme respect, he rose in his most graceful manner and saluted the table on which the pie had stood, while Madeline looked at him, delighted. None of the youths she knew in Alvatown would have thought of such a thing, or, if they had thought of it, would have known how to do it in the graceful way he did.

"It lays it over any of them," he concluded, with enthusiasm.

"Oh, really, Mr. Churchill," said the pleased, complimented housewife, "I don't deserve such praise. Madeline can make them just as good, if not better than I."

Paul now turned to Madeline with his most winning smile. "Well, if that's a fact you're the greatest cook for your age in this civilized world."

She smiled at him and shook her head.

"Isn't that right, Mr. Sneed?" he said, turning to her father. "I ask you. Isn't that right?"

"Oh, mother," Madeline protested, "you know I can't."

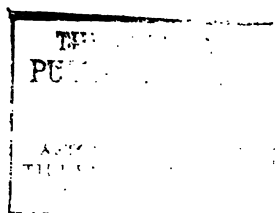
"You're not bad at it, girl," her father chimed in, heartily. "You've put some pretty good ones on the table. And I've had the pleasure of taking them off." He laughed vociferously.

Madeline turned shyly to the visitor. "Did you really like it?" She rose, as she spoke, mutely offering to help her mother clear away, but was waved back to her chair.



WITH A GESTURE OF EXTREME RESPECT, HE AROSE IN HIS MOST GRACEFUL MANNER AND SALUTED THE TABLE

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"Did I? Say, she is the greatest cook I ever saw. Now that's right."

"Mama, can I help you?" Ruth inquired, warmed by the general glow into desire to shine.

"No, dear; finish your cake and then get ready for bed."

But the child was very wide awake. "Wasn't that a fine show, Madeline?" she cried. "I never saw such a funny man in all my life as the fat one who danced in the yellow polka-dot shirt."

"What killed me," said her father, beaming on the manager and chief actor of the exhibition and glad to exchange compliment for compliment, "was the coon that played the sliding trombone with his feet. Say, Churchill" (he settled down to business talk, as man to man), "what does a performer like him make a week?"

If there was any affectation of indifference in the light, off-hand way the minstrel-man replied, any effort to impress these poor things with his wealth, they did not in the least suspect it. "Oh, I pay him a hundred."

Sneed sat up straight in sheer astonishment, although it was long past his usual bedtime hour and he was beginning to be extremely tired. "You don't mean it! One—hundred!" Then, judiciously: "Well, I guess he's worth it." He tried to act as if the figures had not absolutely staggered him, and puffed hard on his cheroot in trying, but did not hide the deep impression they had made on him.

Madeline, too, was much impressed, and looked at

Churchill wonderingly. "There must be an awful lot of money in the minstrel business, to be able to pay salaries like that!"

"There's nothing *out* money in it," he replied, serenely, "provided you've got a reputation. Did you note the tenor singer? The artist that sang 'Sally in Our Alley'?"

"Oh, yes; I never heard a better tenor in this town."

Ruth was listening intently. "When he sang up high," she interjected, "I felt the goose-flesh all over me. I had the nicest chill, for a minute. Did you have one, Madeline?"

Madeline, a little worried because she saw that, suddenly, the drowsiness that follows eating, coupled with the drowsiness that comes from late hours, was claiming John Sneed for its own, did not reply, save by a nod.

"Did *you* like the singing?" Churchill asked, insistently, of her.

Still she did not reply, at once. She *had* liked "Sally in Our Alley," and she had thrilled, a little, as the singer's voice had climbed, climbed, climbed far beyond the power of any voice in Alvatown to climb. But that had not been the song which most had pleased and thrilled her. Somehow, though, she rather hesitated about mentioning the one that had. It had been a love-song, pure and simple, and when it had been progressing the singer's wondrous eyes—still she didn't see just why she shouldn't voice her preference. She was sure it would please him. And she was anxious to please—him.

"The song which I liked best was 'Oh, Promise Me,' which Mr. Churchill, himself, sang," she finally admitted to Ruth, and then, as if in a quick run to cover: "didn't you like that, dad?" She had not dared meet Paul's eyes till she had brought her father, thus, into the conversation.

The drowsiness was gaining on him, but he woke, sufficiently to acquiesce, a little indistinctly. An instant later his chin dropped to the ruffles which his wife had ironed with such care on his shirt-bosom, another instant and a little snore escaped him. The late hour, the excitement and the plenteous chicken-pie had done their work with him.

Madeline looked quickly, somewhat mortified, toward Churchill, but he only smiled— smiled sympathetically, not in derision, and she liked him for it. And also he saved her from embarrassment by hurrying on the conversation.

"Well, in a good show, like mine," he said, "there's so many star specialty parts that it's hard to say, off-hand, which is the best." His conceit about his show did not seem at all offensive to her. Indeed, she rather liked it. He smiled at her. "But you liked the 'Promise Me' song, did you?"

She nodded with a heart-felt emphasis.

"Most of 'em do," he said.

Her praise was meat and drink to him. As he basked in her earnest admiration he expanded. He pulled out one end of his watch chain from which a gold match-safe depended, and, dangling it and indolently watching it, spoke slowly, throwing a quick

smile at her each time he let his eyes drift from the swinging bauble.

"It's one of my best numbers. I've killed a lot of 'em with it." Now the smile was more pronounced.

"I thought it was beautiful!" said she, her voice hushed slightly, because she meant, so earnestly, just what she said.

Her mother, too, was quite beneath his spell. "So did I, Mr. Churchill," she broke in. "You have a superb voice."

He lapped up the praise as eagerly as Roosevelt, Dave's frequently lost dog, lapped water when he thirsted.

"Oh, don't mention it, Mrs. Churchill," he said, trying to seem modest; then, as if forced to make acknowledgment of his own merit in the strict interest of truth: "Still, I ought to have. I was trained."

Ruth, not knowing, quite, whether the speech was mischievous or not, declared, greatly to her sister's horror and embarrassment:

"It must have made an awful hit with Madeline, Mr. Churchill, because when you sang the last line: 'Oh prom—iss—me-e-e-e, Oh—prom-m-m—iss—me'," (she hummed the words, with uncanny recollection of the tune) "Madeline, who had hold of my hand, just squeezed it so hard that it was all I could do to keep from yelling. Gee, it hurts yet!" She grasped it with her other one and simulated great pain, wickedly, while Madeline blushed fiery red.

But Paul was pleased, and showed it, while her mother, at whom she threw a quick glance, was puz-

zled rather than annoyed. The clock's slow statement of midnight, Sneed's stirring in his sleep, and even his quick, startled "What?" as he woke, for an instant, only to fall quickly back into his slumbers, were welcome episodes to Madeline, because they took attention from her flaming cheeks.

"Come, Ruth," said Mrs. Sneed, with resolution, as much to save her daughter further possible embarrassment as because the child's bedtime had long since passed. She rose and took her firmly by the hand. "Come, Ruth, it's time for you to retire."

Protesting mildly, the child let herself be led to the stair door. "Good-night, Madeline," she called, from there, but had no answer.

"Good-night, dad."

Dad snored in reply.

"Good-night, Mr. Churchill."

Mr. Churchill answered very courteously, with his best smile, "Good-night, little one."

The instant they had gone and closed the door behind them the minstrel turned to Madeline with evident relief; with an unspoken but unmistakable delight because, since John slept, stertoriously, they were now, virtually, alone. It flattered her and even frightened her a little bit—delightfully. She met his gaze even less steadily than she had when the others had been present, but he found her hesitancy quite as charming as her less embarrassed friendliness had been.

"'Oh, Promise Me' made a hit, did it?"

Very shy she was in answering him, but she could

not fail, she felt she ought not to fail, to tell him what great pleasure he had given her.

"I don't know why," she admitted, "but it had the strangest effect on me! Really, I was entranced, for a minute."

Suddenly she felt their fellowship exceedingly; it seemed less wonderful, more real; a conviction stirred within her that they two had something in common which must be protected against all the balance of the world. She looked nervously at her father, as if he were a dangerous outsider and when he stirred nervously in his sleep and fingered his napkin, sitting partly up, she warned Paul with a guarded "Hush!" as if she recognized the fact that he might have something to say which he would not wish a third party, even her own father, to overhear. She kept warning fingers on her lips until, once more, the old man lapsed into undoubted somnolence, a state of which he gave proof with strange, strangled snores.

Paul waited, for a moment, to make sure that he slept soundly, and then spoke in a low voice, confidentially, almost caressingly. "Why shouldn't you have been entranced?" he said, at length. "I sang it straight *at* you. You know——"

Madeline smiled shyly at him—shyly, but invitingly. "What?" she inquired.

Things were progressing very rapidly, to his delight, and, quite as certainly, to hers; indeed her joy in it was greater, far, than his could be; for, to her, the situation, with its constant veiled suggestions of a mutual understanding, was an absolutely new ex-

perience. She had never gone thus far with anybody else.

He reached out and lightly tapped the back of her hand which she withdrew with speed, but not offense. "You knew what I wanted you to promise," he declared.

The situation was intoxicating in its marvellous delight. She, Madeline Sneed, who had, of late, found life so insufferably dull as to be almost unbearable, was sitting there, in her own home, receiving court from the handsomest, most brilliant, and one of the most prosperous young men whom she had ever met—a youth round whom the glamor of the footlights trembled. There was not a girl in Alvatown who would not, she knew well, be green with envy if she knew of it.

"No; I didn't know, at all," she countered. "What was it?"

He touched her hand again and this time she was not so quick in drawing it away. "Guess."

She was having a delightful time; that she was dabbling with a danger did not once occur to her, although the study of his eyes would have informed a person versed in men of his sort that she was. She knew, perfectly, however, that things were going faster than the staid and slower members of her family might approve. "Look out," she warned, "dad'll wake up."

Now he stood quietly by her side. "Don't you know?"

She shook her head.

"I want you to write to me."

She looked up into his face. "What about?"

He touched her, now, and she permitted it. He laid his hand upon her shoulder and she made no move to shake it off. "Yourself," said he.

John stretched in his chair, and, quickly, Paul withdrew the hand and stepped back a pace. After deciding not to strike a noisy match, he lighted a cigarette at the lamp so that if the old man genuinely woke he would find him innocently engaged. There was a worried pause in their exciting talk until John settled down again, which took some seconds. Then:

"Will you? I'll give you the route and we can have quite a fine little correspondence."

There was a flash of teasing, but there was a flash, also, of jealous curiosity in her eyes, as she said, countering: "Do you write to many girls? Because, if you do——"

"Not me," said he, assuringly. "I don't see one in ten that makes any hit, at all, with P. Churchill."

Then a horrid thought obtruded, which had, in vaguer forms, worried her for quite a while. "But what's the use? You're not coming back here."

He bent over her—close, close to her. "That all depends upon the kind of letters you write me."

There was a wonderful expression in his eyes, she thought, as she looked into them, and his mouth drooped at the corners with such earnestness! Who could doubt him or resist his wonderful appeal? She melted and, while she did not speak, he was quite conscious of it.

"Will you do it, Madeline?"

It was the first time he had called her "Madeline." It startled her; she had been looking down, but glanced up quickly.

He noticed this. "Come, now. Loosen up a little. I'm an old friend of this family. Don't give me a frost."

"But it sounded so queer!"

"Well, get used to it. What's the use of this 'Mister' and 'Miss' bluff. Call me 'Paul.'"

"I couldn't—yet." She shook her head and flushed.

"But you will; sure you will," he said, emphatically. "You——"

John, quite mechanically and without opening his eyes, felt in his pocket for a match. They remained as if transfixed with terror, and that she should feel thus gave the girl a little warning thrill. It was as if she became automatically conscious of a sin, or danger; but the consciousness was not acute. After yawning and stretching, without opening his eyes, her father slept again, however. Paul essayed to speak, still pleading. She could see the pleading in his eyes.

"Be careful," she warned in a whisper. "S-s-s-s-h! Mother is coming!"

He felt that he had won. Her anxiety to hide this night's small episode from her parents proved it to him.

"All right, Madeline," he said, and strolled off, easily, about the room, looking at the pictures.

He was bent above the flowers in one of the win-

dow boxes when Mrs. Sneed came down the stairs. She was quite distressed because of what she felt had been almost a discourtesy to him.

"Excuse me for leaving you, Mr. Churchill," she apologized. "There's always so much to do."

"Why, certainly. Certainly. I understand," he graciously replied.

"Can't I help you, mother?" Madeline inquired, sorry for the interruption, but, none the less, filled with a real relief.

"No, no. Never mind. I can do it, daughter." She caught sight of John and felt terrifically mortified. "Well, look at father—fast asleep!" Now genuinely apologetic, she turned to Paul: "He never stays up as late as this excepting during the elections. I'll wake him up, so that he can say good-night."

He placed a restraining finger-tip upon her arm. "No; please don't. It's all right, Mrs. Sneed." He was very gracious, very courteous and considerate. "I'll be going in a moment. We've got to make a jump to Haverhill to-morrow. But don't bother the governor to say good-bye."

Mrs. Sneed looked at the sleeping John. It did seem almost too bad to rouse him. "All right," she granted. "But he'll feel sorry." Then her innate hospitality stirred in her. She beamed upon the visitor. He had liked that chicken-pie so much! Poor fellow! So fond of home cooking and had to live in hotels, all the time! "By the way, do you suppose if I wrapped up a bottle of nice, home-made pickle-lilly that you could take it along with you?"

This embarrassed Madeline a little. It seemed so old-fashioned; so—so countryfied, to offer this exquisite and extraordinary young man of the world, this polished, prosperous person, a bottle of—of home-made pickle-lilly!

"Why, mother; he hasn't any place to carry it."

But Paul saw an opportunity to give Mrs. Sneed real pleasure, and, by doing so, further ingratiate himself. "Oh, yes I have," he said heartily. It's very kind of you, Mrs. Sneed. And I accept with much appreciation."

Nothing will go further toward the winning of a housewife's heart than such an episode as this. She smiled in triumph. "See? I told you so! I know what people want, even if they are extraordinary managers of minstrel troupes!" her glance said to Madeline.

As her mother left the room, declaring that she would put it up for him, well corked, so that it would not spill, he glanced at Madeline with a sly smile and she smiled back at him. She understood how clever he had been. It gave her a new sense of his ability.

"Great woman, that!" said he. And then, approaching her more boldly: "Now say. You're going to write to me, ain't you?"

CHAPTER XIII

SHE still hesitated, partly because, undoubtedly, she loved to have him beg her, and partly because she really felt a qualm or two—which had its psychological significance. If a local youth had asked her to write letters to him while he was away, she would have decided the matter quickly, only considering her inclination, without thought that there were any ethics whatsoever to be calculated in the matter. But with this visitor from the great world outside it was a very different thing. She appealed to him, trusting his superior knowledge of affairs, as if he were not of all people the most interested person, and, therefore, the one least to be trusted.

“Do you think I ought to? Would it be right?”

“Sure. Why not? What’s the post-office for?” he gaily whispered. “I’ll start a few lines from Haverhill to-morrow. How shall I address you?”

She was surprised. “Why, Madeline Sneed, of course.” She had not thought of keeping secret any correspondence they might carry on. She had never hidden anything from her family.

He, scheming deeper, darker than she dreamed, instinctively at work upon a plan which would protect himself, demurred at this. “What’s the matter with

some—you know—some made-up name, care of General Delivery?"

"But why?" she asked, quite innocently.

"Oh, then nobody would be on."

It did not enlighten her. She still could not see why, if they corresponded, the fact should be kept secret. Seeing her absolute bewilderment, he yielded.

"Oh, very well, Madeline Sneed goes. I guess it's better that way, anyhow." He was sparring to restore her confidence, if he had lost any of it. "Of course it is. Why, that's the only way to write to a girl." He stood smiling at her and she, who had, for just an instant, been repelled, regained her faith in him. "And say," he went on pleasantly, "I'll send you some little keep-sakes—gloves, lace collars—you know. Little flub-dubs and fancy stuff. They'll look swell and make a hit around town."

She did not wish to have him feel that anything of that sort was in the least necessary. She wanted him to know that it would be the letters she would care for. "Oh," she said hurriedly, "you needn't do that."

"Why not?" he laughed. "Now you leave it to me. I'm there with the trinket habit, strong."

She wondered, as she listened, why his slang was so much more agreeable to listen to than Dave's. What was there about him, anyway, which was so wonderfully fine, magnetic, so compelling? She could not say, at first, and then, looking at him, answered, in her heart: "Oh, everything!"

"When we go to Brockton, in the shoe-district, I'll

sting myself for a pair of Oxford-ties. Very classy! What size shoe do you wear?" He looked down at her feet.

Innocently she thrust a foot and a trim ankle out, and his greedy eyes devoured them. "Ones."

"Leave it to me, now. I'll do the right thing. Leave it to Paul."

She smiled, her whole heart thrilling with her confidence. "What is it about you, which seems so different from other men?"

"I don't know," he answered easily, but plainly pleased, "I've always been that way."

She didn't catch the egotism in the tone or manner. There were strange stirrings in her heart which made her dull to surface indications. Her girlish innocence assured her that as she looked at him she understood him—understood him, probably, much better than any one had ever understood him in his life, before. And it was wonderfully fine that to her, Madeline, who had lived her life in that small country town and been bored beyond expression by its dullness and its pettiness, this gift of understanding such a wondrous man as Paul Churchill—handsome, famous—should have been vouchsafed.

"Have others noticed it?" she asked, a little anxiously, to make sure.

When he said, "Well—yes," her heart sank in her bosom.

Subtly he understood this and hastened to make it clear to her that, after all, there never had been any one who really——

"But you're the first woman who ever mentioned it to me," he said. "I suppose it's because I am sincere." He fingered his watch-chain.

She nodded, taking him quite seriously. "Probably. Yes, it must be that."

He reached for her hand again and she let him have it without resistance. "No kidding goes with me. I believe in being serious."

It was nice to hear him say such things. It gave her confidence in him, convinced her that all this was real.

"I believe in being serious," he went on earnestly. "I don't pretend to be better than anybody else, but when it comes to the heart-talk I'm right there with the sincerity."

She smiled at him.

"Every time," he added as a final emphasis.

Madeline looked at him intently for a few minutes, letting him retain his hold upon her hand. Then, suddenly, she swung her eyes away and withdrew it. An awful thought had come to her. Might he not think her bold?

"You don't think me forward, do you?" she asked, frightened.

"No," he answered, comfortingly. "Why, sure not. You're just like I am—when you feel something here." With one hand he clasped hers tighter, with the other he tapped lightly on his vest above his heart. "When you feel it, why, it's got to come out, that's all!"

It was marvellous, the way he understood her!

"We can hide the fake kind," he continued, "but sincerity—never!"

"Yes; that explains it," she agreed. "Somehow I feel as if I just *must* talk with you. I——"

Her father started in his sleep, and fumbled with his napkin. It worried her. The napkin slipped, and, with a mechanical, instinctive, sudden start, he caught it ere it fell. She jumped.

Paul, less timorous, was not dismayed. He knew the old man to be quite unconscious, and leaned toward her. "Say, Madeline——"

Worried lest he rouse her father, she put her hand up to his mouth. He smiled and caught it with his own.

"Sh-sh-sh!" she whispered. "Wait a moment!"

He pressed her fingers to his lips, and smiled, as, beyond doubt, her father fell into a sounder slumber than any he had known before. As soon as this was certain, Madeline drew her hand away.

"He's way out in 'Frisco," Paul said, comfortingly. "But your mother'll be back in a minute. I've got a scheme."

"Does it concern me?" she asked, archly.

"Everything I do from now on concerns you."

His words thrilled her to the very depths of her young soul. Oh, how thoroughly his earnest tones convinced her! "Yes," she said, breathlessly. "What is it? Speak low."

"Listen! Day after to-morrow we'll be in Haverhill. Matinee day, too. I want you to come down. Take the trolley."

"Alone?" she asked, a bit aghast.

"Why certainly. The question almost had annoyed him. How innocent she was! Then, with deep earnestness: "I've got to see you. Didn't you tell me, this afternoon, that there was nobody here you cared for?"

"Well, there isn't," she said, quickly, sobering, as her mind reverted to her hatred of the town and her contempt for those who lived in it. "I hate the place."

"And the people?" He asked this anxiously, as if on her answer much depended of importance to the comfort of his heart.

"Yes," she said promptly. "Most of them. And *all* the men."

"I don't blame you," he said softly, as his eyes devoured her sweet, young, earnest face, and then swept down, as they so often had done since the moment he had first seen her, across her neck, her slim young figure, lingering, for a time, upon her bare, slender arms. "Will you come?"

She hesitated. "I—don't know. . . . I'd—like to. . . . Shall I tell the folks?"

"Tell nobody," he said very promptly. "Just come; that's all. There'll be a front seat for you in the box-office." He smiled winningly. "I'll sing the 'Promise Me' song to you again. You've got to come!" He spoke very fervently and she smiled at him; she even made a little movement toward him. It was so very wonderful that he should care so much! "Believe me," he went on, "there won't be your equal for beauty in the whole audience."

"Now you're *not* serious!"

"Yes I am, Madeline."

Something fell, out in the kitchen, where her mother was preparing the pickle-lilly for him. It startled both of them, and, instantly, they drew away from one another, assuming quite instinctively, the attitude of two who had been busy with quite casual conversation. Madeline glanced quickly at her father, then at the kitchen door. When Paul made a movement toward her she motioned him away.

"Listen!" she said, imperatively, but very softly.

"Say yes," he urged, hurriedly, anxious to get her promise before her mother actually entered or her father wholly aroused. "I'll meet you after the performance, put you on the trolley and you'll be home at 6.30, in time for supper. I've got—lots to say to you . . . What's the answer?"

She hesitated for a second, then, hastily, so that the matter might be settled before the inevitable interruption came: "I'll come."

It was as if a most momentous thing had been decided. A period had been arrived at in her life. She felt that she had been progressing, headlong; and that she might, now, pause a second to take breath. The necessity for close proximity to him—close bodily proximity—had, for the moment, passed. She could rise, now, and walk away from him and give a little, just a little, thought to other things, without endangering the wondrous fabric of the future which she had been busy building, desperately busy building, while she had the opportunity, with the feeling in

her heart that if she did not build fast, fast, the opportunity would never come again.

"Madeline, you're all right!" Paul murmured.

Now she went boldly to her father, whom she had been afraid would wake, and took the chance of waking him by adjusting the elusive napkin firmly in his limp and slumberous hand. She went toward the kitchen door as if anxious to discover what it was delayed her mother. Mrs. Sneed, entering at that moment, fondly thought, on seeing her, that she had been impatient for her coming. Yet there had not been any conscious artifice to the girl's movements.

Paul also hurried forward to greet Mrs. Sneed. How cordial the young people were! It made the happy housewife's heart warm pleasantly. She held out toward him a package, tied carefully in newspaper.

"Here it is; I'm sorry that you can't take more."

"Mrs. Sneed," said Paul, impressively, "you're very kind. Something good will happen to you for this." He looked about him for his hat. "Good-night and thanks."

Finding the hat he took it and held out his hand.

"Good-night, Mr. Churchill," Mrs. Sneed said, cordially; then, with a glance at John: "Shan't I waken father?"

"Oh, no." The young man smiled gayly, most considerately. "I'll just take his hand in his dreams."

Madeline and Mrs. Sneed both smiled. It was so nice of him to accept father's dullness with such unwavering politeness. Certainly he was the true gentleman!

"Good-night, Mr. Sneed," said Paul, dangling John's limp hand, and thus proving him to be an even sounder sleeper than he had supposed. If he had only known! he thought. He might have—but no; he had gone far enough with Madeline for the first time. There is such a thing as art. "Good-night!" he said to the unconscious John, "I've had a bully time with your family, and I'm coming back, some day."

He let the old man's hand fall to his lap, and it aroused him slightly. He opened his eyes, looked up in a dazed way and shook his head. He did not recognize Paul. "Good-night, Steve," he muttered, thickly. "Come again, Steve."

His wife smiled indulgently. "He thinks you're one of Dave's friends—Steve Weldon."

Paul turned toward the door.

Then Madeline, grown bold suddenly: "Mother, may I escort Mr. Churchill to the gate?"

Her mother hesitated. "Yes, Madeline; but don't stay out in the night air." Paul had moved toward the door and stood there bowing and smiling graciously. "Good-bye, Mr. Churchill. Pleasant journey!"

There was no worry in her heart as she turned her whole attention to her sleeping husband. "Come, father," she said, shaking him. "It's time for bed. Everything is ready for you. Mr. Churchill has gone."

John roused slowly, looked around him, got his bearings, realized what she had said to him and sat up in his chair. "Is Dave in?" He stretched and yawned with vigor.

"Not yet, daddy."

He scratched his head with care and very thoroughly and flopped back comfortably into his chair. "Well, I'll wait for Dave. He'll be along soon. What time is it?"

"After twelve," said Mrs. Sneed, as, listening for Madeline's return, she went about the room and tidied up.

"Well, I'll wait, mother," John said sleepily, unable to arouse sufficient energy to go to bed. "Wait for Dave." He instantly dropped off to sleep again.

At the gate, in the deep shade from the big maple, which the bright moon threw across the gravelled walk, Madeline and Paul were standing, careless of the flight of time. Upon even him the glamor of the evening fell, and a thrill of actual sentiment, for a second almost as pure as that which made the girl gasp happily, swept over him. Then he looked down at her, his eyes travelling their usual course, downward from her face and Paul Churchill was himself, again.

"Some *girl*, you are," he said, smiling.

"Oh . . . Paul!"

Mrs. Sneed was vaguely worried by her daughter's long stay out of doors. Of course Mr. Churchill was a most delightful fellow, and all that, but—well, Madeline might take cold in the night air. She went to the front door and opened it. "Madeline! Madeline!" she called.

"Yes, mother; coming."

Then she heard her say, quite formally: "Good-night, Mr. Churchill."

"Good-night, Miss Sneed," he answered.

And Madeline ran in.

"Come, Madeline, let's go to bed. Father will wait up for your brother."

"All right, mother."

Mrs. Sneed moved slowly, somewhat wearily, about the room, making the final preparations for the night. It had been a wearing, if an interesting, day, and she was very tired, when, now, for the first time, she "let down." She took the candle from its place on the machine, lighted it with a sputtering match and walked slowly to the stair-door, Madeline following her, mechanically. When her mother paused, struck by some slight neglect which must be remedied, the girl stopped, too, and stood there, waiting. Mary went back to her slumbering husband and turned down the lamp which stood beside him on the table, until it burned only with a small, blue flame. In the gloom she caught the glimmer of John's napkin, which had once more fallen to the floor, picked it up, folded it and laid it on the table. Then she returned to Madeline.

The girl stood by the entrance to the stairs, not exactly waiting for her, but with her eyes turned dreamily toward the doorway through which Paul had left the room. Something in her attitude arrested Mary Sneed's attention. Anxiously she held the candle up and scrutinized her face by its pale light, with, upon her own, the earnest look of watchful, understanding motherhood. She knew that this day

had been full of new emotions for the girl she loved, and wondered—wondered——

But she saw nothing in her eyes to terrify, or even worry her; so tremendous is youth's power of dissimulation. She did not speak, but smiled, and lovingly patted the girl's cheek. Madeline smiled back at her with innocent, wide eyes. It was a very satisfying, contented smile—so much more contented than Madeline's smiles had generally been of late. With a sigh of comfort Mrs. Sneed held the door open, and Madeline, with one last glance toward that other door, passed through, her mother, with an almost imperceptible shake of her head, following her, and closing the door softly, so as not to wake the sleeper.

For a long hour John snored in his solitude. Then the sound of cheery whistling cut into his dreams, and, a moment afterwards, Dave came. He hung his hat upon a hook beside the door, tossed his coat upon the couch, crossed to the table, lighted a cigarette from the lamp which he turned up, and sat down, after drawing up a chair to face his father. Evidently he had planned a little conversation. But the hopeless depths of the old man's slumbers quite discouraged him. He shook his head.

"Asleep at the switch," he gravely said and rose.

Then, as he blew clouds of smoke about the room in half unconscious comfort at the tang it carried to his upper lungs, he inquired, dully, of the silence: "I—wonder—where—my—dog—has—gone?" and shook his father's shoulder, reflecting that he could not let him sleep there in his chair, all night.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY were mad days which followed, for the girl—weeks of dissimulation and deception of the family, weeks of worry when she stopped to think, and tremulous, excited happiness when she did not. It was with the utmost difficulty that she managed to arrange things so that she could take the first trolley trip to Haverhill without attracting the attention of her mother, and, possibly, arousing opposition. Her whole life's first direct lie to her mother was when she excused the trip by saying she must go to buy the parts for a glee chorus the young folks were practicing. The singing at the minstrel had greatly stimulated vocal effort among the young of both sexes in the town—but the parts had been already bought.

What a journey was that trolley trip to Haverhill! Wondering, complacent; exulting and depressed; timorous and bold; filled with contradictory emotions from the start of its first mile to the completion of its final block, in the crowded center of the little city. Every time the conductor looked her way Madeline wondered if he might not be endeavoring to fix her face upon his memory, so that he could be quite certain to remember it; every time the car stopped she was fearful some one might board it who knew the parts for which she went, ostensibly, were already in

possession of the Glee Club, secured for them by Percy Deane, and who would recognize her and inquire her errand.

But no one whom she knew got on the car, and, when she reached Haverhill, things went as if by clock-work. Paul was waiting for her, exactly where he had said he would be, and they went to a hotel and had the grandest luncheon! Afterwards, he hired a "rig" and took her on a long drive out into the country, being careful to select roads which appeared to be but sparsely settled and but little traveled.

"It's fine, Paul," she said, shyly, "to be really alone with you. I——"

"Ain't it?" he said gaily, muttering with aggravation in his heart because a farmer's wagon was in sight, approaching.

"Oh, I wonder if I know them!" Madeline said, worried, at the sight of it.

"Of course you don't," he comforted, and she did not. Before the afternoon was over she had got so that she did not shrink and tremble every time she saw a team upon the road ahead of them.

He took her back to Haverhill in good time for the trolley which would get her home in time for supper, and arranged for the next meeting. He and his troupe would be busy in the little group of Massachusetts cities for three weeks, and he planned to have her visit him, oh many times.

The second expedition went as smoothly as the first had gone, and ended as successfully. It gave her courage for the third, and she looked forward to that

with the keenest joy because it would, again, give her an opportunity to see him on the stage, and hear him sing that marvel of all melodies, "Oh, Promise Me," direct to her, amidst the magic of an orchestral accompaniment. But the singing made her thoughtful, and left her, when the song was finished, not elated, but depressed. They met, at the stage-door, as soon as he could get his street clothes on.

"I've just time to catch the trolley home," she said, dispiritedly. She had realized so suddenly that the conclusion was a shock that she could not, forever, continue to devise excuses which would satisfy her mother for these trolley trips; and, any way, his company, when the week ended, would abandon the immediate neighborhood, and journey to a section so far distant that she could not think of visiting it. The future loomed ahead of her, lonely and disconlate. "I'll have to hurry," she said, in deep depression.

He read her thoughts without much difficulty. He, too, was worried. He, too, had realized that some new plan must be put into operation if he ever hoped to gain the end which he had determined he would gain. He had not had the least idea that the task would be so difficult or take so long.

"See here, kid," he said, and looked down at her smiling, realizing that his game must win, now, or lose permanently. He loathed to think of losing, and, too, he hated to be separated from her, as, if something were not done, he quickly must be. He was fond of her, in his own fashion. He was fond of her, but, principally, he coveted her.

She glanced up at him inquiringly. "What is it? We'll have to hurry, any way."

"No, we haven't got to hurry," he said, boldly. "You ain't going to take that silly car this afternoon."

"Not take the car!" She looked at him, aghast.

"No," he said, and smiled down at her with that dominant look which he sometimes assumed with her and which convinced her that he was extremely strong. "It's all nonsense, you getting nervous and hot-footing it. You'd think you were Ruth's age."

"But mother will be looking for me."

"Suppose she is. Can't she just look, an hour or two, while you have a good time? Come, stay, have supper with me. We'll have a bang-up supper, and you can see the first part of the show. Then you can hop a car. I'll sing 'Promise Me' in the first part. I can arrange it."

"But what will she think has happened to me? She'll be *crazy!*"

"Where does she think you are, to-day?"

"Gone on a basket-picnic with the girls. I started with the basket, but I pretended to forget it on the trolley."

"Good lunch for the motorman," he laughed. "Well, couldn't you be late home from that picnic?"

"Not as late as that."

"See here, girly, are you going to throw me down?"

"Why, Paul!" The mere thought that she could be unfair to him seemed monstrous to her.

"Well, don't run away from me like this, then," he said, feigning anger.

"But I've *got* to."

"Got nothing." Suddenly he bethought himself, however, that it might be better for her to depart, that afternoon, as usual, but she must go after having promised to arrange, the next time that she came, for the whole evening. To this she finally agreed.

"It will be Saturday," said he, and looked at her with speculative eyes. He wondered how he might plan for what he had in mind without alarming her. Then he summoned into his fine voice a touching note. "It will be Saturday, and—my last day!"

"Oh, I can't bear to think of it!"

"Nor I, sweetheart; but, any way, we must make plans for Saturday which will make it a day to recall always—a red-letter day."

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes had filled at thought of parting; now she was eagerly acquiescent.

"Well, I've got to work, as usual—two performances, you know."

"I know—you work so hard!"

"It's wearing. But we don't jump till Sunday. We'll get a good night's sleep, right here. It's the one-night stands that wear you to a frazzle."

"Oh, Paul; you must be careful of your health."

"For your sake, dear?"

"For my sake, Paul."

"All right, then, if you want me to keep well and strong and be in good shape for the long, hard season that is stretching out in front of me, you must humor me a little."

"You know how much I want to humor you!"

"Well, then, Saturday, you must arrange it so that we will have a nice long time for talk together."

"Yes?"

"And I have two performances. You know how much time I can get to talk on matinee days—until—after the night show."

"I couldn't stay till after that."

"Why not?"

"What would they think, at home?"

He looked at her keenly, waiting for the slightest sign on her beautiful, flushed face of a suspicion of his motive. "Couldn't you tell them that you'd gone to spend the night with some girl friend?"

"To spend the night? You mean stay away from home—all night?"

"Why, sure. Why not? Haven't you ever?"

"Oh yes; lots of times; but——"

"Well, isn't this occasion just as—well, important—as any of those others were? We can get together, after the evening show, and have a nice long supper, at the hotel, and talk our teeth out, and then I'll have a room all ready for you—I'll arrange it with the clerk, myself—and you can trip up-stairs and get your snooze and go home in the morning. Maybe I will hire a rig and drive you part way home." He was trying to be very clever. He waited a long minute for her answer, but it did not come, at once. "Come, kid. If you love me, you'll do that for me! Think! Why, we won't see each other any more for——"

"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried, aghast at the mere thought of the long separation. "I—I might——"

His face broke into the bright smile she loved so well to see on it. "Of course you might; and will."

"Letty Miller's going to school here. I might get her to write and ask me——"

"Get nobody to write," he warned. "Don't let a third in on our secret. Many's the beautiful little trip that a third party's——"

He stopped short and bit his lips. He must not put such thoughts into her head.

"This is just our matter," he said, more carefully. "It's our secret."

"Yes," said she, a little tremulously.

"How are you going to fix it?"

"Bess Radshaw *was* here, but she's gone away. I don't believe so many people know she's gone. Our folks don't. She's gone a long ways off, too—to San Francisco. I'll say she's written from here."

"Fine!" he cried heartily. And then again there came that hungry look into his eyes which sometimes made her shiver just a little. "You'll come, sure, will you? You ain't going to throw me down!"

"Did I ever—throw you down?" She spoke with a bit of dignity, but he kissed it away and had her laughing—promising and laughing in a moment.

But all the way home on the trolley, whirling through the little towns and the sweet countryside, she sat very gravely, and, from time to time, her lip curled in beneath her white and even upper teeth and hung there, pressed by them into pale bloodlessness. She had promised, and she never broke a promise; but, during all that ride, her soul kept asking: "Shall I?"

Shall I? Shall I?" She did not know just what in her it was that answered, finally and defiantly: "I will!"

Her resolution had not changed when Saturday arrived, but the thinking which it had occasioned had been very constant, very wearing; so much so that when she told her mother that Bess Radshaw had invited her to spend the night in town, with her, and go, that evening, to the theater, and, the next day, to the Baptist Church to hear a famous minister, her mother, while she did not question the desirability of the outing, gravely questioned its advisability.

"You ain't very well, are you?" she asked, with motherly solicitude, which, somehow, almost seemed to break Madeline's heart. "You sure you're feeling well enough? Ain't you been running 'most too much, lately?"

"Alvatown has made me—nervous," said the girl. "Maybe if I visit Bess, I'll feel a little more contented here."

No argument could possibly have been so strong in winning Mrs. Sneed's consent. She had not, of late, worried quite so much about her daughter as she had at one time; the girl had seemed far more contented. But anything which would help on the work of making her more so was very much to be desired. At one time, she reflected, she had been actually fearful that Madeline might, some day, cut loose terrifically and flee far from the family! But she seemed to take more interest, these days, and when she was at home did far less grumbling over

the small household annoyances. This going out had done her good. Perhaps the longer absence from her home would send her back still more willing to remain in it until she——

Would she ever marry? Mrs. Sneed was often prone to wonder about this. None of the young men in town seemed in the least to interest her. She had given them such small encouragement that most of them had ceased calling, although they still looked at her with longing, wistful eyes, when they saw her in public. She never had taken much interest in boys. That minstrel, Churchill, had seemed to interest her more than any one had in the past, but, of course, he had gone, now, and been forgotten. Dave and her husband mentioned him, sometimes, and often Ruth spoke of the wonderful performance, but she did not remember once, for full two weeks, when Madeline had mentioned him.

Madeline was very white and tremulous when she met Paul, as pre-arranged, in a quiet, side-street restaurant. The hunger in his eyes seemed, somehow, more alarming than it ever had before, and it had always frightened her.

"I've got everything fixed for you," he said softly, when the waiter was not near. "All you got to do is to step up to the desk and register. You're to be Mrs. Mary Hawkins, of New Haven, and you'll get the room next mine. Remember—Mrs. Mary Hawkins, of New Haven."

"Oh, I wish you hadn't chosen 'Mary'," she said, helplessly.

"For why?"

"It's mother's name, you know."

"Don't be a fool!"

She shrank from him, astonished. He never, during all the days of their acquaintance, had used a tone like that to her before.

"I wouldn't care to use it," she said, almost firmly.

He was truly sorry that he had not thought of it; "Mary" had occurred to him, because it was most common of all female names. Dimly he could understand her hesitancy, but not at all acutely, and he did not see just how the matter could be fixed without "getting in bad" with the hotel people. Her face warned him, though, that it must be fixed, in some way, and so he promised her, as graciously as the real temper into which the little episode had thrown him would permit, to arrange matters somehow, and left her for that purpose.

"Say," he said to the hotel clerk, "I got the name wrong on that woman that's coming on, this afternoon, to join the company. The woman that's to look after the wardrobes, you remember? Wife of the member of the show that died? I told you about her. We got to give her something to do or let her starve, and it's all we can find for her. We need her, too."

"Mighty decent of you, *I* think," said the clerk, admiringly. "There's a lot of widows who ain't treated quite so nicely by the men who hired their husbands."

"Oh, we do what we can to make things easy for our people," Paul said carelessly. "But her name ain't 'Mrs. Mary Hawkins,' like I told you. I had forgotten. It's 'Mrs. *Harry* Hawkins.' Will you change it, or shall I?"

"I'll change it."

"She won't need to come in to register? I'm going to the train to meet her, and——"

"No; I'll have her shown right to her room."

"She'll be glad of it," Paul commented, "because she ain't had money, since poor Harry died, to even buy a mourning dress." This was a masterpiece of thoughtfulness, he thought.

"Poor as that, eh? Well, it's decent of you to fix up a job for her. You theatre folks do stand together, anyhow."

"We try to."

"I got it fixed, all right," he said to Madeline, a few minutes later. "You're Mrs. *Harry* Hawkins." He laughed heartily, as he often did at his own jokes. "There's a coster song about you."

"And I'll be 'Mrs. Paul Churchill' just as soon as—possible—won't I?" she said, dreamy-eyed and happy.

"Sure," he answered. "Just as soon as ever I can fix things."

"And you don't think it's possible that any one can ever, ever, ever find out that I came here, this way, to see you? I'm worried, awfully, about—about staying in the same hotel, Paul! You know they would be sure to say the *awfullest* things if they knew that!"

"Nobody's going to know it but just you and me."

"And there really is nothing wrong about it, anyway!"

"Sure not. Only we just want an hour or two alone together. That's all. What's the difference between our having them here, when we can't have them anywhere else, because I'm with this show, and having them the way a man who wasn't in the business could arrange it, in your sitting-room, at home, there, with your father sound asleep in his arm-chair?"

"Oh, no; there's nothing really wrong about it," she agreed.

Suddenly he bethought him of what might be a vital matter. "You ain't any baggage, have you?"

"Why, how could I have?"

"Well, in hotels, when a person comes without her baggage, they make 'em pay cash down, and if you paid cash down you'd have to go into the office."

"Oh!" she cried, affrighted.

"Now, don't get excited. I'll have to leave you just a minute more while I fix *that*."

"Say, Bill," he said to the hotel-clerk, "I forgot to pay you for that room of Mrs. Hawkins's."

"You going to pay?"

"Sure; poor thing! Didn't I say that she had had hard luck?"

"Well, you actors certainly *do* stand together."

"And I'll tell her to go right up when she gets here?"

"Everything will be ready for her."

"Better let me have her key. I'll give it to her at the station. I'll have just about time to get her here before I have to hurry to the theatre."

The clerk shied the key across the marble counter to him. "Well, you can afford a little charity. Done big business here."

"Oh, so, so. So long."

"So long."

"There's your key," he said to Madeline, a little later, when, again, he had hurried to her in the restaurant. "When you get ready, go right to the elevator and tell the boy the number of your room. Nobody will see you but the boy, and here's a veil I bought you, so that he won't see so very much of you. He'll show you to your room and I'll be right along. You go upstairs as soon's the show is over. I'll be there just as quick as I can dress."

The girl scarcely saw the show, that night, although she sat behind the curtains of a stage box, gazing fixedly and trying desperately to listen. Even Paul's song, "Promise Me," did not arouse her from her deep abstraction. It was with a start, when he had almost finished singing it, that she awoke to consciousness that he was on the stage, at all, and looking, now and then, in her direction—not triumphantly, compellingly, as he had looked that first gay afternoon, but slyly, furtively, as if she worried him a little.

It was with the utmost difficulty that she loitered on the way to the hotel. She wished to get there not

too long before him, for she knew that after she had reached there she would be incredibly alarmed until he came. A hundred times she told herself that she was doing, really, nothing wrong, in resorting to this ruse to have an hour or two alone with him. Everything was so different with them from what it was with ordinary lovers! Ordinary sweethearts could be together in the home. If he was one of the young men of Alvatown he would be there at the house seven evenings of the week, and half of them would be quite free from interference by the balance of the family. But, thank heaven, he was not one of them; and, also, he was on the road, continually; his business would not let him visit her in Alvatown. What harm, then, in arranging for a few hours—just a few hours—all alone with him as best the matter *could* be arranged. There was absolutely nothing wrong about it. She said that over to herself half-a-dozen times.

After she reached her room at the hotel, she sat upon the red-plush chair and shivered, although it was a warm night in the early Fall. She had never been so nervous in her life.

What if she had been seen by some one at the theatre who knew her, and, in curiosity, had followed, spying. What if they should get suspicious, for some reason, back in Alvatown, and pursue her? Had she covered up her tracks? What, what would Dave, what would her father, do to Paul if they found out——

She brought herself up with a sharp turn. What

was there for them to *find* out? Simply that she had arranged to spend a little farewell time alone with the man she loved and whom she was to marry. There was absolutely nothing wrong in it.

Had he not entered, presently, however, it is doubtful if she could have stayed there. In her heart, when he came in, she knew that ten more minutes of delay would have broken down her courage and sent her flying from the place.

But when she heard the key turn in his lock, next door—ah, how she had listened for it!—she felt better, and, a moment later, when the door between the two rooms opened and he ran in to her, with his finger on his lips, enjoining silence, then her fears vanished. It was wonderful to be alone with him, at last.

He caught her in his arms.

Later, when, carefully, according to a plan which he had mapped out in his mind in every detail, with words which he had carefully rehearsed, and with a manner which had been selected quite as carefully, he told her that he did not wish her to go home, at all, but to go on with him, she shrank, chilled.

“Not—not go home?” she whispered, startled terribly.

He soothed her. “Why, what’s the difference?” He tried to speak about the matter lightly, as if it were not, really of the slightest consequence. “We’re people of the world, we are. And what’s the difference? As soon as we can get to New York City

we'll be married, and then you would stay with me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, then; of course."

"Well, why not now? What's the difference? Just a few days and a few words spoken by a parson. Just as soon as we can get to New York City——"

"Paul! *Paul!*" She looked at him, aghast.

He pretended grave offence and that almost killed her. "Oh, very well, if that's all you care for me! I thought you *loved* me!"

"Oh, I do; I do!"

"Well then——"

"And so you won't go with me? I must go on alone, when I had thought that, at last, my life was to be made complete, my—my——"

He could not find good words to finish with, but he looked at her with his big eyes full of heart-breaking reproach.

The battle did not last long. She was not a match for him.

Almost with a cry she threw herself into his arms, panting, breathless, trusting, yearning, conquered. "Yes, yes; I will go," she whispered, "only—only—you do love me, Paul, don't you?"

"Of course I love you, little girl, with all my heart and all my soul."

"And—and—as soon as possible—we will be—married?"

"Sure. Why certainly we will." He held her off and tried to look into her face, but she would not

allow it. Instead she hid it on his shoulder, throwing desperate arms about his neck.

"And now," said he, "you're *really* the kind of a girl that *gets* a man and *holds* a man. You've got some *nerve*! I was afraid, there, for a minute, that you hadn't any nerve."

"Oh, Paul; you do love me, don't you?"

CHAPTER XV

THE three weeks which followed were incredible —mixtures, kin to dreams, of agony and ecstasy. Paul, she told herself, a hundred times a day, was very, very good to her. He denied her nothing. At every town they visited she went to dressmakers and milliners and drygoods-shops, went there with money in her purse to buy whatever she might fancy. In the hotels, although she kept closely to her room, in day-time, she had everything she could desire in fine accommodations, service, dainties from the table. She had had not the least idea that so many fine elaborate things had been devised for women's wear and women's palates as she now had constantly at her command. His expenditure of money for her sometimes almost scared her. He certainly was generous.

But, when he was not with her, keeping her mind busy with his jokes, talk of his business or with love-making, she sometimes felt as if she must go mad. What could they, possibly, believe at home? Insistently she read, each day, no matter how she had to search to get it, the newspaper from Alvatown; continually she worried lest, when she secured it, she would find in it some reference to her or to her family. A thousand times, when she was hurrying to get the

newspaper, she imagined headlines which she might find leading its local news, referring to her—speaking of her disappearance as an elopement, as a desertion of her parents, as a mysterious disappearance, even as a suicide. Any one of these, she told herself, in endless repetition, would be far better than a statement of the truth.

The truth! The truth! Sometimes she stood before the glass and stared at the reflection there with wide eyes, quite incredulous. Could it be possible that she—Madeline Sneed—who had held herself so much above the ruck of folk in Alvatown could be the girl who traveled, now, from place to place, dodging strangers' eyes, surreptitious, sinful? Ah . . . Ah . . . facts are so incredible!

The show was now engaged in a long series of quick "jumps," little journeys from one place to another, in none of which it stayed more than one night. The traveling was wearisome beyond belief; the feeling that she must go closely veiled and inconspicuous made it a torture. She held aloof from all association with members of the company after Paul had made a slip in starting to present her to one of them. Instead of naming her as "Mrs. Churchill," he had almost blurted out "Miss Sneed," and barely caught himself in time. Then he had tried to make a joke of it and made the matter infinitely worse, she thought. She never, willingly, came into contact with any member of the troupe again, and that angered him. He had, at first, had the men come to their rooms, sometimes, when he wished to talk to them of business; now she was un-

willing he should do this and, instead, he went to them. And he went oftener, and stayed longer, she was beginning to believe, than was quite necessary. He spent a good deal of the time away from her, and, as she would not even joke and gossip with the chambermaids in the hotels, it left her absolutely alone. In the solitude of populous places lonely hearts feed on themselves even with a greater greed than in the solitude of wildernesses. She did not mention this to him; she tried to never trouble him, even with regard to details which he might adjust, but she felt it very keenly. Constantly she was oppressed by the great fear that, some day, before they reached New York and he made her his wife, she inadvertently might anger him. Then . . . Oh, he might not . . . How she suffered.

But, in his way, too, he was kind to her. It often made him impatient to find that she was not becoming as time passed accustomed to the position he had placed her in. He found it difficult to in the least appreciate her point of view and found it irksome to observe that the bright beauty of her old days was fading, slightly, under weariness and worry; but he did not harp upon these things, and for refraining took unto himself much credit in his heart. It had not occurred to him that, after she had irrevocably taken the momentous step she would still cling, with such fierce tenacity, to the traditions of her old and what he thought her "narrow" life. It had been his thought, if he had ever given the matter really careful thought, that once launched beyond recall upon a life with him, she would be gay and reckless as had been certain

other women he had known, in his own experience and that of other men. Madeline gay and reckless would have been what he considered an ideal companion, for a showman on the road. But she would not even take a drink! When, time after time, he asked her to have cocktails before meals, or proposed a bottle of wine with their dinner, she refused, almost with a shiver.

"Come on, sis," he pleaded. "It might brace you up. You'll give me the mollygrubs. Say, you look like a Dutch funeral!"

But she would not drink the liquor, although, instantly, she would try with pitiful effort to be gay and entertaining, sometimes making such a real success of it that he would quite forget his grouch, sometimes failing so completely that, as soon as he could go, he said he had to "break away," and vanished, leaving her alone, to again begin that silent, horrible experience of retrospection, introspection, bitter, bitter, bitter self-denunciation. But, always, she fought for him in her soul.

"It *wasn't* his fault!" she assured herself a dozen times a day. "It was my own—my—own—my own! He's doing what his life has taught him is all right enough to do. I know that from what they all think and do and say who are around him—whom he lives with. It was my own. I did what I knew was wrong. My life had taught me that as much as his had made him think the other."

After such a mental battle, when, weakened by the struggle, she could not at all control her thoughts, they were almost sure to fly back, back to Alvatown, and

dwell there, rummaging in memories, worrying, regretting. How she longed for just a sight of Ruth! What would she not have given to have Dave come in, as if nothing had occurred, and to see a ragged bunch of race-track "dope" upon the floor, for her, when he had gone away, forgetting it, to gather up and keep for him in order to prevent a quarrel. Her father! Sometimes, in the old days, she had wondered if he were not leading Dave to paths of ruin, and had blamed him for his inefficiency, his laziness, his crudities. She had compared him, most unfavorably, at times, in her own mind, with the more polished fathers of some of the girls she knew in town. But now, as she sat alone in one hotel bedroom after another, not knowing and not caring, even, what town she was in, so long as it was not Alvatown or near to it, she told herself that she had been an ingrate and a fool to criticise him. All the things he had not done which she had thought he should have done and all the things he had done which she had thought he should not have done, had been so wonderfully offset by his decency, devotion to his family, and steady, plodding endurance of the burdens which his narrow, tiresome life had laid on him, that, sometimes, he loomed before her in her mind as a real hero. And—mother! Always she fought thoughts of her away, when she was able, for they made her miserable—they were an agony so exquisite and penetrating that they almost made her ill. What must her mother think, what must she suffer! She attributed the lack of hue and cry in the newspapers to her good judgment and knew

that if it had been she who had prevented it she had done so to save her, Madeline, and not to save herself or save the family. The vision of her sitting by the old round table with its brass student lamp, poring, late at night, above the pages of the heavy Bible, was to her a nightmare which she ever struggled madly to arouse from.

It was after a hard fight of this kind, that, in a wild effort to escape herself, she hurried to the street without a veil for the first time since she had joined Paul. She noted that the world seemed lighter, more attractive; that she felt less of a prisoner than usual, but was in a little dry-goods store and pricing collars before she realized just what it was had happened to her, before she thought about the veil. On the instant she was frightened. Her breath came in quick gasps, her knees trembled under her, she cast her eyes about her furtively and in each form she saw an old acquaintance. It was horrible. She caught the counter of the little dry-goods store with a tense hand. Thank heaven she was *in* a dry-goods store, for there they must sell veils!

"I want to see some veiling, please," she told the girl who had been serving her.

"Across the store; third counter on th' other side," the girl replied, indifferently.

Across the store! Madeline glanced along the way she had to travel with wide, frightened eyes. There were a score of women in the space between her and the counter which the girl now pointed out. Which ones of them, oh, how many of them, were from Alva-

town? The moment was a tragedy, a torture until she caught herself and forced her wild emotions into some sort of control. How silly such a panic was! In all these weeks, although she constantly had feared it, she had never seen a single soul from Alvatown. She hurried to the designated counter with what boldness she could summon, bought a heavy veil and then and there adjusted it, somewhat to the pinched, consumptive shop-girl's critical surprise. She knew the thing was foolish, she knew that she would not meet folk from Alvatown in such a place, she called herself a fool. But the veil gave her comfort, and, turning, she came face to face with Miss Losee, who lived across the street from the Sneed place—the woman who put up her blinds when secular parades went by and was the town's most greedy and most vicious gossip. The girl almost fainted. Miss Losee did not look at her twice. There was, in the elegantly dressed and heavily veiled woman whom she passed, there in the crowded store, nothing to suggest to her, frank, open, simple Madeline Sneed, who had so strangely vanished out of Alvatown.

That evening's early dinner at the hotel was a difficult meal for Paul. Madeline was insistent in inquiries as to when the company would reach New York—the mecca of her hopes, the only place, it seemed, where lived a clergyman whom Paul was willing should officiate at a function so important as his wedding. It seemed that he would not be married, could not, possibly, be married, at any other edifice than "The Little Church Around the Corner," where,

he said, his father and his mother had been married and all actor folk who married had the ceremony performed. She could not understand why any church should have so foolish a name, it seemed strange to her that, when every other date connected with the company's affairs was so very definitely fixed, this most important one should be uncertain; but she rather admired Paul for the sweet little touch of sentiment which made him wish to marry in the edifice wherein his parents had been joined and not elsewhere. When he told her of the way in which the church obtained its name, how an intolerant clergyman of some conventional congregation had refused to preach a funeral sermon over the remains of a dead actor, but had said, carelessly, when asked who would attend to it, that there was "a little church around the corner," whose pastor might be willing to officiate; how the dead actor's friends had gone straight to this little church and found the pastor glad to help them and filled with Christian charity instead of bigotry; how the profession, then and there, had adopted the small church as all their own and helped to keep it going, turned to it when they turned to any church and dubbed it, in affection, by the name which the smart clergyman had given it in his contempt, she was almost reconciled to wait. The "Little Church Around the Corner" certainly had claims on the profession, but, she would be very miserable while she waited for its ministrations. She could not move Paul, though, to think of any other plan. They almost had a quarrel about it.

It was after this that, desperately, she sat down and wrote a letter to her mother. She could no longer stand the agony of thinking of the misery at home. She felt that she must send some cheering word to her, some word which would relieve her and at the same time clear her own skirts of a part of her offense against the family love, or go insane.

She told her, without detail, that she and Paul were married, and that, as soon as possible, she would arrange it so that they all might see each other once again.

A tremendous weight was lifted from her heart when she had dropped this letter in the post box; but a new one fell upon it, when, after the performance, she saw Paul again. What would he say when she told him? How would he take the thing which she had done without consulting him? Would he be very angry?

CHAPTER XVI

SHE could hide nothing from him, and, in consequence, sat, next day, worried horribly in the hotel bed-room. She had become accustomed to hotel rooms, after some weeks of travelling. And Paul always took the best. This one she calculated, with an eye which rapidly had grown sophisticated, was above the average. It was large. A brass bed stood in the alcove, and floods of light came through a great bay-window. The dresser was a handsome piece of carved mahogany. There were two easy chairs, very elegantly upholstered, and, besides, a tete-a-tete—a piece of furniture, the novelty of which, she knew, would have filled her with delight a few weeks previous. Paul's large professional trunk, with its mighty labels, "Churchill's All-Star Minstrels," stood open by the bed, and her trunk, new and glaring, also open and overflowing with fresh finery, stood near the window. The room was not untidy, but, she knew, as she glanced over it, that it would have worried Mrs. Sneed if she had seen it. Her mother! When would she hear from her? It was almost time for her to get an answer to her letter.

She was feeling just a bit more cheerful than she had, at first; usage had done something for her, and, besides, Paul had been kind enough and certainly

attentive. The first horror of the plight in which she had placed herself had worn away. She could look down without shivering at the handsome new tailor-made gown which drew tightly across her knees as she sat waiting for him. She glanced at the big mirror, too, with something akin to satisfaction, although, somehow, it was not so very close akin to it. Her hair had been done up by a professional—in Marcel waves, with a low knot in the back. It would have astonished Alvatown, and was most effective, she was certain, as a frame for her beautiful face (now paler than it had been), but it, too, failed to give her any very keen delight.

When Paul came in she turned to him with a bright smile of welcome. He was, as he was once a day, fresh from the barber's chair, and waxed exceedingly. He was very handsome, in his way, and, now that she had made the great surrender, had given herself to him, irrevocably, for all time, she watched for him, when he was absent, joyed when he came back, clung to him and lived for him and in him. He was everything to her, and more than everything had ever been before.

Now, though, as she looked at him, she was a little nervous. She did not know just how he might feel in the matter of the letter to the home-folks. He might be very angry when he learned about it; but she hoped he would not be. She decided she would tell him of it, then and there, and that the way to handle it was to assume, in advance, that he surely would approve what she had done.

"So you've come," she said to him, as he approached. She was working at his shako as he entered. It had been dishevelled by a rain. "Whatever kept you so long?" She held out her hand and he took it with real pleasure.

"Why, I'm not late, little girl. I've just come from the barber's. Haven't been there more than twenty minutes."

"But it seems longer," she admitted. It had, truly. She was very lonely when he was not with her. She saw some of his faults, now; but he was all she had, she told herself, continually.

"What kind of a house have you got to-night?" She took a place on the tete-a-tete and invited him, with a gesture, to the other.

"Sold out," he answered with great satisfaction. "It's the same, everywhere we go. Greatest season ever. And what's more, we can play return dates, here, and get the money any time. I tell you, girlie, we've got the show."

She smiled at him and he reached over, taking her slim wrist in his ringed fingers. Raising it, he ran the fingers of his other hand up beneath the loose sleeve at the elbow, and caressed the flesh.

"And we've got the drum-major, too," she answered; and then: "Stop! You're tickling me!" She still held the brush with which she had been working at the shako and with it she gently slapped him. Then: "Your fur-hat—it's getting very shabby—for such a very great drum-major."

"Never mind the hat, Madeline. I've got a brand-

new lay-out. Came by express, to-day. It's over at the theatre."

"Oh, that's fine," she cried delighted; and then, with not much hesitation: "I want you to look perfect, to-day, because——"

"Why, to-day, especially?"

"Somebody will be here to see you on parade."

He was astonished. He had become so thoroughly accustomed to having her, and helping her, shun everyone, that a statement of the sort from her was really amazing. "Why?" he inquired.

She laughed, rose, put the mighty hat upon his trunk and hurried to her dresser. There she opened a drawer deftly and took from it a letter. This she handed to him.

"I thought it would surprise you. Read that, and then tell me what you think, Mr. Drum-major!" She tried to speak quite casually, as if the matter, and the way he took it, were not of the utmost moment to her, but there was a quiver in her voice, a shrinking question in her eyes as she handed him the letter.

His look justified them as he began to understand. "What in the devil is this?" he asked. "Umph! From home?"

She nodded, as he spread the letter in his hand.

"How did they know where you were? Who told them?"

"Read it, Paul." She tried to look at him, but could not.

"But how did they get your address?" he impatiently insisted. "No one knew you were with me."

"Read it, silly! Read it, read it, read it!"

He was annoyed. His face showed that; but his annoyance was not yet acute. The handwriting bothered him and he read, stumblingly, aloud:

"Dearest daughter Madeline," the letter said. "Your letter from New Haven received on the 23rd, lifted a great weight from our minds."

"Umph!" he exclaimed.

"We were quite distracted," he read on, "and I have been on the point of notifying the authorities to set about a search for you. But your mother, always calm and sure that we would hear from you at the proper time, advised patience. Your letter brought her her reward for it."

Paul looked up sharply at her, but after a moment's thought, refrained from comment. Presently he read on:

"I can scarcely wait to come to you, when you get back to Springfield. I count the days. There is so much to say. Surely you will tell father why you left us with so little ceremony and what has happened in the meantime."

Again he looked up at her, but, this time, her eyes were carefully averted. Seeing this, and that she kept them so, he went on reading.

"We bear up with the hope that you have done nothing which will cause any of us regret."

Now he spoke rather sharply. "What did you say to them in your letter? I think it was a mistake to write to them. Why didn't you show me the letter?"

"Go on," she said, slowly, without answering his question, and he turned back to the letter.

"I shall arrive in the afternoon and come straight to your hotel, where I shall take you in my arms and give you mine and your mother's blessing. David will come with me."

Paul let the hand which held the letter fall with a gesture not only of acute annoyance, but of fear. "Damnation, Madeline! Whatever possessed you to do this? You must be crazy! What will they say to you—to me?"

"Finish it, Paul, finish it," she said nervously. "Can't you stick to the letter?"

"Your mother and Ruth send love, lots of it," he continued. "We all thank God—that—you—are—married!"

The words had a strange effect on him. The letter dropped from a limp hand. He looked at Madeline, first stupidly, as if he did not rightly grasp what he had read, and then in anger. The expression on his face alarmed her and she shrank back in her seat.

"*Married!*" he said, slowly. "Hell, girl! What the devil made you write that? We—married!"

She sprang up and threw her arms about his neck, a pitiful expression of distress and helplessness upon her face. "Paul, Paul," she cried, "what else could I write them? I dared not write the truth—dared not tell them what I was to you! It would have killed them. It would have killed me. Can't you see, Paul, I had to write them something? I couldn't remain

silent any longer. You *must* stand by me! You—must! I had to see them.”

Her agony was dreadful. It softened him. He took her hand in his, as she sat there with her face bowed in her elbow on the curved arm of the *tete-a-tete*. Then, with the other hand he raised her head and gently kissed her on the brow. It was one of his fine, gentle moments, the moments which had conquered her and made her love him.

“Paul, you will not betray me!” she cried, pitifully. “You cannot do that! I have—burned my bridges! Help me! Help me! I am in your hands!” She threw her arms up to his shoulders, clinging to him in a desperate appeal.

“But we are *not* married!”

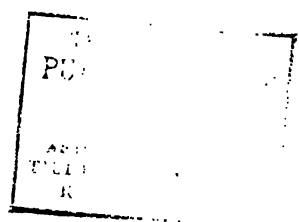
“I know, I know. We are *not* married. But we shall be, and they will never know. Have you not said that we belong to each other?” Her face was full of such pleading as it had never shown before. “Nothing can take you from me. I have given up everything for you. Have you forgotten, Paul, the night at the theatre—how you came to the box and whispered, softly: ‘You are beautiful. I love you.’ And afterwards, at home, and then in Haverhill? How you wrote and I answered, how you made engagements and we met, and how, under the spell of your love, I—came to you? Oh, Paul, can you forget?”

He was not unmoved by this appeal. None could have been. He gently touched her hair and drew her nearer to him.



"PAUL, YOU WILL NOT BETRAY ME. YOU CANNOT DO THAT. I HAVE BURNED
MY BRIDGES. HELP ME. I AM IN YOUR HANDS."

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"Is it all to die, here, for the sake of one, poor, miserable little lie?" she pleaded. "A lie that will spare them?"

He did not answer her, at once, and she hung on him, searching his averted face distractedly.

"Paul! Paul! Paul!" she cried. "Oh, answer me!"

Still he kept silence, and she madly twined her arms about his neck, imploring him as she embraced him frantically.

Under the influence of her caresses he relented, in a measure. "But you shouldn't have written that letter! You can't tell what the old man would do—if—he—knew." He did not push her from him, but untwined her arms and stepped away from her.

"Yes, I thought of that, too. That is why I wrote that we were married."

She drew well back from him and spoke with her eyes fixed on her slipper, which tapped the carpet nervously. She was thinking back along the avenues of agony which she had traveled.

"You see, I—wanted to see them. Every night I lie in the darkness staring up at the ceiling and thinking of Dad and Mother and David and Ruth. They—keep me awake!" She looked up at him, imploringly. "Oh, Paul, you must have known!"

He did not reply, directly, but, after a moment, asked: "Well, what are we going to do about it?" He spoke very seriously, uneasily, his eyes fixed on the floor. "We can't let him know about it. *We can't let him know about it.* I can't afford to have trouble. Do you think he'll suspect?"

She fought back the idea as if it had been an accusation aimed at her direct. "No, never, never! He wouldn't think it of me." Then, after a second's pause: "If I tell him we are married, he'll believe it."

His tone, now, was a mixture of entreaty, inquiry, demand. "And you'll stick to it? . . . To the finish?"

She threw herself into his arms again. "Yes! Yes! I'll swear it, if necessary." She looked up at him, as she hung there with her hands clasped on his shoulders, holding her from falling, for her knees were tremulous. "But you must—you must stand by me!"

He released her gently, moved a little from her and paused, deep in contemplation. The letter lay upon the floor close at his feet. He stooped and picked it up. "We all thank God you are married," he read slowly, and then let the letter fall again from his relaxing fingers. Madeline sank weakly to a seat.

After a moment there, without so much movement as the twitching of a muscle, he slowly turned his head, not raising it, and looked at her. The best there was in him was stirring, at that moment, and she recognized it and was thankful. She began to weep, not stridently, hysterically, but softly, as if her heart had broken and her strength had gone. He went to her and very tenderly laid his hand upon her hair and stroked it.

"I will protect you," he said slowly. "We are—married!"

She looked quickly up at him, almost incredulous,

at first. Then she seized his hand and covered it with kisses, then pressed it to her cheek.

"And some day, Paul, some—day—soon—you will——"

She did not finish out the sentence, but he knew quite well what she was asking.

"Some—day. Yes, some——"

He was interrupted by the tinkle of the telephone upon the wall and went to answer it. But, after a step or two, he stopped, wondering what the message might be, and suspecting——

He stood there, hesitant, and she, too, rose. For a few tense seconds they stared, each into the other's eyes. The bell rang again, longer, this time.

Words choked her. When, at last, she managed to articulate, her voice was hoarse and frightened.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "He is here. Speak—to—him!"

He hung back, reluctant. "He would rather hear *your* voice," he weakly urged.

"I can't! I can't! I can't! Answer, Paul, answer!" she implored.

"I—will," he said, after another second's pause, and stepped slowly toward the telephone.

CHAPTER XVII

SLOWLY, thinking deeply and biting at his lower lip because the situation was a hard one to solve properly, Paul crossed the room to where the telephone was jingling. Madeline watched him with lowered face but upturned, anxious, frightened eyes. She shuddered as he reached the instrument, and, when he began to talk into it, held her breath as one might when waiting for some dreadful thing to happen.

"Hello," he said. "Yes . . . Yes. . . . Oh, yes! All right. . . . Mr. Sneed? . . . Oh, yes; you're talking for him? Go ahead."

Madeline advanced toward him with slow, uncertain steps, and, as she passed, stooped and picked the fallen letter up, groping for it, slightly, because she did not find it possible to take her eyes from Paul for more than a mere second.

He stood there, with the receiver at his ear, listening. After a period of waiting she completed the slow journey to his side, and touched him on the arm. He kept the receiver at his ear, but turned from the telephone to nod to her and with his free hand, motion her to be quiet. She stood, fascinated.

Then, suddenly, he began to talk again. "Yes? . . . He has just arrived in town? . . . Yes.

. . . Yes. . . . What? . . . Is he there, now? . . . Wait a minute."

He clapped his cupped hand over the transmitter and turned to Madeline, still holding the receiver to his ear. There was a look of acute worry on his face. "Shall I tell him to come up?" he asked, tensely, in a hushed, nervous voice.

Her eyes were agonized, as she replied, after a second's thought: "No; you go down. Tell him I am—dressing."

He nodded, turned to the telephone again and took his hand away from the transmitter. "Coming right down. His daughter——"

She reached her own hand out and placed it quickly on the transmitter. Her eyes burned into his. "Your wife! Your wife!" she breathed intensely.

He frowned at her, but, as she took her hand from the transmitter turned to the telephone again and made, promptly, the amendment she demanded. "My wife is—dressing."

Then evidently came a question and he waited.

"Yes," he said, at length, "be right down."

This done, he hung up the receiver and turned to Madeline, still frowning.

She did not seem to see the frown; her mind and heart were busy with the words which she had heard him utter. She looked at him with a slow, wondrous smile, with love in it, and hope in it, and now, with trust in it again. "Your—wife!" she said. "Shall I be that, Paul? Shall I, some day, be—your—wife?"

She did not wait for him to answer, nor did she

notice that the frown had not entirely left his face. She slowly put her arms around his neck, slowly, lingeringly kissed him.

He accepted her caress with barely noticeable reluctance, so slight that if she knew it, at all, she was not much impressed by it. He did not quite untwine her arms when they had clung for a few seconds longer than he evidently wished, but his hands were moving toward them when she let them drop.

"I must go," he said suddenly in haste. "Hurry, Madeline. Finish your dressing. Put on a shirt-waist."

He was in his shirt sleeves and looked about for his coat. Seeing it across a chair he shrugged it into place, while Madeline, with one movement, threw off her matinee dressing-jacket. It was far more beautiful, that matinee, than the most elaborate bodice she had ever known, at home, and the corset cover its removal showed, elaborate with pink baby-ribbon, had cost more than the matinee. The skirt which set so snugly to her hips and hung, in the perfection of tailor-made elegance, in straight, smooth lines to her dainty, patent-leather boots, had cost as much as any pair of complete dresses she had ever had at home. She was very beautiful, standing there, with bared neck and arms, and in the dainty, simple, elegant dishabille. She was thinking deeply, not, however, of these things, as she crossed the room and opened one of the big dresser's drawers, from which she took a handsomely embroidered sheer-linen shirt-waist. She had calmed greatly and was busy in an

effort to arrange the words which she should utter when, presently, she met her father. She made a delightful picture and, as Paul started from the room, it caught his eyes and held it. He stopped before he reached the door and the ill-nature vanished from his face beneath the influence of the delightful, tempting spectacle. Admiration and the look which meant the only love which he was capable of feeling were plain and growing in his eyes as she turned, noting him.

The effect upon the girl was instantaneous. She had been thinking of her father, who was waiting for her, of her mother and of Dave, of little Ruth—of the old home. It was a moment full of the psychology of innocence and purity. His presence as she dressed, the look upon his face—these were so strong an outrage on her state of mind, that she shrank back, abashed, pained, cowering.

"Paul!" she cried, and almost fell against the dresser as she tried to hide one bare arm with another and cover her bare breast with her two trembling hands. Then she snatched the shirtwaist and clasped it tight across her bosom as a shield against his gaze. "Don't look! Go! Leave me!" she implored. "You *mustn't*!" Now she raised the shirtwaist and covered her face, also, in an agony of shame. "I will die if you look at me again. I am—ashamed! ashamed!" Shrinking she backed away from him into the alcove, where the bed was, and hid herself behind the curtains which partially concealed the recess.

There may have been a glint of understanding in

his soul, for he obeyed her. After a second's hesitation of surprise, he turned his eyes away, even from the curtains which she hid behind and went slowly, with head bowed, to the door. He hesitated at the threshold for a second, and turned half around, as if to look at her or speak to her, but evidently thought better of the plan, opened the door with a quick, decisive movement and stepped through it without comment, closing it gently after him.

With her shirtwaist partly on, she stepped out of the alcove, very pale.

"G—o—d!" she breathed. It was as if she had escaped some tremendous peril.

Then, recovering, she finished putting on the shirtwaist, buttoning it with swift, deft fingers which moved as if they did not dare to tremble. Her hair had been "done" that morning, by a professional hairdresser—what unknown luxury for Sneed's daughter, Madeline!—and with a few swift, clever touches she adjusted the little imperfections which had come to it. Automatically she uncaught the waist-band of her skirt and tucked the shirtwaist into it; without even looking at it as she managed it, she clasped a handsome leather belt in place.

Then she hurried to the dresser and gave herself a swift, appraising look, not that of vanity, but that of search for imperfections, incompletenesses. Finding none, she turned away and cast about the room that next-to-final survey which is a woman's habit when she has completed dressing. After a second of consideration she caught a jewel from the dresser and

pinned it at her throat, a rose from a slim vase-full and thrust it into her delightful hair. She was not conscious of her beauty; of the instinctive elegance of manner the supreme simplicity with which, now that she had them, she was wearing all the richnesses of her wardrobe. Thus she stood, for an unappreciative moment, studying details of her dress in the big mirror, and then started toward the door.

A thought arrested her. She halted suddenly and hurried to her trunk, diving rapidly into its tray. From the odds and ends within she took five photographs, and, breathless with her hurry to surely get this done before her father came up to the room, arranged four of them upon the mantle-piece after having, in a sort of rapture, pressed her lips in swift succession, to each one. Having ranged them in their places she paused, despite her haste, to look at them.

"David!" she breathed softly, as she gazed at the first one. It was plain enough that all the strong, deep sentiment which, despite occasional surface turbulence, had always bound the Sneeds, one to another, in their family affection, was now at work in the girl's heart. "Father!" she exclaimed, as she paused before the second picture. "Ruth! Ruth!" she whispered, looking long and earnestly at the third. And before the fourth, as she breathed: "Mother!" she almost sobbed.

One picture there was, still, remaining in her hand, as she stood there, and this, finally, she put in place beside the others—but she left a wider gap between it and her mother's than there was between any other

two in all the line. Standing at the row's end, it was one of them, but, still, a bit aloof. She looked at it almost as long as she had gazed at that of Mary, but upon her face as she did so were none of those fine signs of rapturous love which had shown on it as she had contemplated each one of the others. "Madelaine!" she said, at length, and then, after a long pause, and in the faintest whisper: "The black sheep!"

She was still gazing at the pictures when a knock upon the door disturbed her.

She brought herself into control with a quick shrug, and turned. With a plain effort she summoned up a smile, to face the door with cheer well-counterfeited. "Come in!" she cried loudly, careful that her voice should appear gay.

Paul was the first to enter, and, as he stepped into the room he cast a quick, worried glance at her. There was nothing, evidently, in her appearance, to alarm him, and the muscles of her face relaxed.

Immediately behind him was John Sneed, dressed in the homely habiliments of his best bib and tucker, the black string tie bowed at the front of his low collar, hanging in two doleful loops and two limp ends, his black broadcloth coat, long-skirted and unpressed, showing the effects of hours in a snug car-seat, his black soft hat crushed in his hand, one side of its wide brim rolled tight in nervous, anxious fingers. He extended his arms hungrily.

"Father!" she cried, softly.

"Daughter! Daughter!" he responded in a hoarse voice, hurrying toward her.

She literally fell upon his breast and clung there, with her arms about his neck, muttering incoherent words of joy. He fondled her and patted her with childish ecstasies of greeting. Neither was coherent, both were near to tears.

"Madeline, my girl! My daughter!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, father," she responded, when she could find words, "this means so much to me! It is the one thing I have longed for. . . . You dear old soul!" Then, drawing partly out of his embrace, she scanned his face with anxious eyes. "Mother? How is she?"

He was himself again, after the first great joy of greeting her, and drew away a little. "Finer'n silk," he answered. "Your letter put her on her feet again and she's feeling immense. I hated to leave her behind."

Paul, standing somewhat awkwardly as spectator, commented, trying to speak easily: "Rather a hard trip for her, I should say. Still, I am sorry she didn't come."

Madeline did not even glance in his direction. It was plain enough that she had eyes and ears for no one, at that moment, but the glad old man. "Here, father, sit here," she said, leading him to the *tete-a-tete*. "Talk to me. Never mind Paul, now. Paul, sit over there, on the trunk." She forced the old man down into the fancy chair and he dropped into it resignedly, a bit suspicious of its strength, perhaps.

She stood above him, looking down at him, her face alight with comfort.

"Where are you going to sit, girl?" he inquired, uneasily.

She dropped into the other seat of the curved chair and arranged herself with care so that she could look straight into his face. "Right here beside you. If Paul doesn't like the trunk, he can pull up a chair." She settled down, her eagerness for news of those she loved apparent on her face. "Tell me of Ruth."

Paul did not take the seat she had suggested, on the trunk, but leaned against the dresser gracefully and looked down at the two with relieved, now almost complacent eyes. The news that Sneed had come and that he knew Madeline was there had terribly alarmed him. But now it seemed a possibility that the affair would pass off smoothly, without unpleasant details.

"Well, Madeline," said John, answering her question with the finest smile upon his face which she had ever seen there, "Ruth was pretty nearly worried to death when you disappeared; but when we got your letter the little girl picked up like a flower that had been waiting for rain, and she's happy as a lark, now."

"How *glad* I am! And David?"

"Oh, he'll be up in a minute. We left him down stairs buying afternoon papers. He's still playing the races with a pair of shears." He laughed. "Good

thing Dave isn't in politics. He'd run a jockey for governor."

She nodded, grateful, oh, so grateful, for the little, inconsequential gossip of the ones she loved from the dear lips of the man who told it. "I suppose he'll be horse-crazy if he lives to be a hundred, which he won't, if he don't stop smoking cigarettes."

Sneed looked at her with a reproach not wholly assumed. "Say Madeline," said he, "look here. Dave got his sporting blood from me. I don't think you ought to talk that way about him. Of course, he's no good. But I wasn't any good at his age. Nobody's any good, at his age. A man ain't much account till he's got a vote and then if he doesn't vote with our party he'll never amount to a cuss, no matter how long he lives."

Paul laughed rather artificially. It took Sneed's eyes from Madeline.

"Say, Paul," said he, "isn't she a princess? You had to steal her, just like the feudal knights used to take 'em away from the old baronical castles."

It was rather pitiful, this old father's mistaken pride in what had happened—pitiful beyond words to Madeline, even a little pitiful to Paul. But Madeline took thought of self-possession and that ease of manner which she was so struggling to maintain, and corrected him gaily:

"Baronial, father."

"Well, it makes no difference what word you use, when you haven't got either." He laughed at his own joke, very genial now that the black tragedy which

had threatened to obscure his life seemed to have ceased to menace.

"Not much, governor," said Paul. He was beginning to feel surer, firmer. His spirits were ascending and he smiled good naturedly.

"By the by, Paul," Sneed said, reminiscently, humorously, "I didn't get a chance to say good-bye to you, that night after the show."

"Not exactly. You went to sleep on me."

"Dad isn't used to late hours," Madeline excused.

"I wasn't what you might call really asleep, girl," her father answered, rising and turning to her with a twinkle in his eye. "When Paul began that minstrel talk of his he aspyxiated me." He laughed uproariously at his own joke. Then, more seriously: "What made you two run away, anyhow? I suppose it's more romantic that way. By jingo, when I married her mother, there wasn't any place to go!" He paused and smiled. "And besides we needed wedding presents too much, those days, to run away from 'em." He turned to Paul, then looked proudly down at Madeline. "But, I say, Paul, she's a jewel if there ever was one. Isn't a bit of me in her, not unless it is her pride. She's all her mother's girl and for a minstrel-man I think you played in luck to get her. Pretty slick piece of courting, boy. And, by the way, don't think you've fooled me. Why, that night when you came into the box at the show, I saw by her eyes that the local Don Jaws was asleep at the barracks as far as Madeline was concerned. Hey, Paul?" He sidled toward him, grinning and jabbed the minstrel in the ribs, de-

lighted. "She's got to get up at the crack o' dawn to fool the old man. Haven't you, girl?" He leaned over her with playful love and pinched her cheek. "How about it?"

Madeline, wondering just what all this talk might lead to, knowing that with every passing moment the time came nearer when she would be certain to be faced by questions hard to answer, the necessity for lies hard to invent, found it difficult to laugh, but did so, turning from her father, then, and biting her lip nervously.

"Look at her, Paul," said the old man, observing this, but misinterpreting it. "She's hiding her face! Hates to think the old man was on! What do you think I did when I got her letter on the twenty-third?"

"I haven't the least idea. What?"

John waited while he pulled a long cheroot out of his pocket, bit the end off, whipped a match across his trousers, applied it to the ragged roll of cheap tobacco, and began energetically to smoke. "Want to know?"

"Yes. But let go on those cheroots." The drum-major, shuddering at the bitter memory of them on previous occasions, took a handful of cigars out of his pocket. "Here's some cigars. Don't you know that there's so much alfalfa in those things that a rabbit will eat them?"

"Well, then, I'm a rabbit," Sneed replied complacently.

But Paul rose and took the cheroot from him,

throwing it into the fireplace. "Now tell us what you did when you got the letter on the twenty-third? We're anxious to know, ain't we, Madeline?" He sank into the seat beside her which her father had just vacated and caressed her arm as it lay upon the curved woodwork of the *tete-a-tete*.

"Well," said her father, reminiscently, "just to show you that I hadn't lost my grip on state occasions, I did a little figuring as follows, to wit: Madeline left home on the seventh—in the morning. 'Bout 'leven, wasn't it, girl?"

"Eleven-fifteen, to be exact," she answered. "I caught the trolley."

"Well, 'leven will do. And I reckon that she went down to Fall River, where she caught the boat, and got to New York the following morning, when she met young Mr. Lothar-i-o. Who, at once, took her to a minister and made her his wife." He looked at them in innocent triumph, certain he had guessed things correctly. "Am I right?" He puffed hard on his cigar, triumphantly.

Paul, startled, rattled, somewhat hesitant, confirmed his guess-work, not knowing what else he could do. "Right, governor."

Madeline's face had been a study as her father talked. She had not known, at all, what theory he had been successful in devising to explain her and excuse her. Now her face relaxed a little, and when Paul spoke, she threw him a look of gratitude.

"Good!" said John, and dove into his pocket, from which, presently, he produced a wallet fastened with

a rubber-band. Carefully removing the elastic, he took out of the pocket-book a folded paper. "And so I wrote this notice. Read it." He handed it to Madeline, and stood smiling, enjoying his cigar, waiting for her comment. "This is a pretty good cigar, Paul."

Madeline nervously unfolded the paper he had handed her, while Paul's eyes were fixed intently on her face, and then read, hesitatingly: "Married: In New York, July 18, Paul Churchill, of New York, and Madeline Sneed, of Alvatown. Massachusetts papers please copy."

Paul rose, somewhat excitedly, and took the paper from the girl's now nerveless fingers. "Well, he said, almost gruffly, "did you print it in the Alvatown papers?"

Madeline looked from him to her father in mute terror.

"No," said Sneed, slowly, and his word, quite evidently, was, somehow, a relief to all of them. "I thought it would be a good way to account for Madeline's disappearance, and stop the town talking, and protect the girl, so to speak. But her mother said that if Madeline *was* married, she didn't need protection, and that if she *wasn't* married she didn't need—publicity. . . . And Mary is so damned pig-headed that I quit."

The mere remembrance of his failure to carry out his plan depressed him for a moment, and he stood there, smoking thoughtfully, a far-away look in his eyes. Paul and Madeline, now side by side in the

tete-a-tete and looking up at him from time to time, presented a peculiar picture of duet discomfort. The girl's spiritual unease was apparent, the man's efforts to restrain her from making it more so quite as evident.

"What do you think about it, Madeline?" her father asked, bringing his glance down to her face. It had been following the smoke wreaths from the good cigar.

"You were wrong this time, governor, and Mrs. Sneed was right," said Paul, not waiting for her words. "The wedding-announcement is all tommyrot. It's out of date." Madeline glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Isn't it, little one?" He patted her upon the arm and tried to help her raise her drooping spirits. "And, besides, we don't much care what Alvatown society thinks, do we, kid?"

Madeline glanced at him furtively, but did not reply.

John did not entirely agree. "Maybe wedding-announcements are out of date," he said, "but thank God weddings ain't." His eye lighted on the bear-skin hat, which was reposing in the corner of the room, and he pointed his cigar toward it. "I guess that's the thing that did for Madeline—that hat. All women are helpless in front of a uniform. A few buttons, some gold braid, a tassel or two, or a sword and a pair of gauntlet-gloves and there you are. I cannot understand those things making a woman daffy. And that hat! Madeline, will you, to your

dying day, forget that hat?" He chuckled and looked gaily at her.

His back was toward the door, neither of the others directly faced it; and they were busy—very busy with their thoughts, so none of them observed it when it opened to admit Dave, lounging, nonchalant, but with an eager eye for Madeline. Beneath his arm were bundled newspapers, a fresh cigarette clung tremulously to his lower lip, while its smoke volumed from his nostrils. A Panama hat was stuck tight on his head, his trousers were bell-bottomed, collar high, shirt loud, tie red. Before they noticed him he had taken off his hat to show hair slicked down, smooth as glass, by the hotel barber, whom he had visited at once, so as to befit him to make appearance before the enterprising sister who had added to the family one of such distinction as the rich, successful, minstrel-man.

Madeline was the first to see him, glad not alone to see him, but glad of a distraction which helped her break the straining dialogue which had been in progress.

"David!" she cried, running to him with her arms outstretched.

CHAPTER XVIII

“**T**HAT’S me,” said David, grinning at her. “D. Sneed, Esquire, general bureau of information to the sporting classes.”

Madeline caught him in her arms, and he accepted the embrace with tolerance.

“You’d think she hadn’t seen him for ten years,” John said to Paul. “Say, Madeline, when you’re through strangling Dave, let him come over here and shake hands with his brother-in-law.”

Dave disengaged himself and waved his hand to Paul. “How about you, Paul?” They drew together and shook hands. “So she married you. Well, what do you know about that!”

Paul laughed. “I suppose she could have done better.”

“Girls are the queerest things!” was Dave’s reply. He turned to John. “Do you know, Dad, I thought that when her nobs went into teamwork she’d step off with Steve Weldon.”

His father was astonished. “Steve Weldon? What would she want him for? He can’t do anything.”

“Is that so? Can’t do nothin’ hey! Ain’t he the best pool-player in Massachusetts?” General laughter much surprised him. “Why, I seen him put ’em all down from the bust, call shot and bank the last ball.

He's a cuckoo with the cue!" After an admiring look at Paul he added. "But as a lady-killer he's a lemon. A dead one." He now gave the room some critical examination and approved. "Say, Madeline, this is a swell bunk, all right. Me and dad thought we'd better drop in and lamp around a little before you two got out of range."

"And we're glad you came," said Paul, and then lied cordially: "If you hadn't, we intended to drop over to the village."

John nodded. "And we'd a-whooped it up for you, too. The day your letter come I went out into the yard and put the ax to three chickens and we had the right kind of a blow-out, you bet."

"Dad wanted to ask in all the neighbors," Dave explained, "but ma said it wasn't nobody's affair but ours, so me and him for once got all the chicken we could eat. Say, Paul, how about the race-track here? Anything doing to-day?"

"Hanged if I know. We have a parade this afternoon, though."

"I don't want to see no parade. They look like chain-gangs to me." Then suddenly remembering that Roosevelt, now, seemed utterly and forever lost: "Oh, Paul, after you left our house that day, you didn't see anything of Roosevelt, did you?"

"Roosevelt, your dog? I wouldn't know him, Dave, if I did see him."

"Why, sure, you would. He's in a class——"

"Lost dog class. Blue ribbon winner," said his father.

"Why do you call him Roosevelt?" Paul inquired.

"Because nobody ever knows just where he is 'until he turns up, strong." He went to the window, gazing down at the busy street. "I hope the race-track's open. I want to pick a few."

"Oh, bother the race-track," said Madeline. "Can't you spend a little time with me?"

"Cheese, Madeline, cheese," he drawled. "You trot in by the bay-window and watch the cork-artists go by. Me and Dad for the grand-stand." He waved her off as she approached him. "Fade away, Mrs. Churchill, fade away."

"I'll do nothing of the sort, Dave Sneed," she said with spirit. "I haven't seen father for a long time and I want him to spend the afternoon with me. You can go where you please—when you please."

Dave grinned at Paul; a row with Madeline seemed like old times to him. "There she goes. Oh, my-o! You'll get yours, too." He shook his head. "No wedding-bells for me! None whatever."

"Don't you worry, Dave," his father prophesied, "you'll get bit some day."

Dave appealed to Paul. "Say, do I look like one of them guys? Not me! If I ever get married it'll be on a bet. Let me put you on to something, Paul. It's all right to tell your wife where you're *going*, but don't tell her where you've *been*."

"I haven't been anywhere yet, Dave."

John added his suggestion on the great general subject. "If you want my advice, don't tell 'em anything." He looked at Madeline and laughed.

"Now, Dad, you don't mean that, do you?"

"You bet your life he means it," said her brother. "He's on. Why, say, Paul, the only woman I ever seen that looked good to me, was that Venus de Milo. I'd like to flirt with her. She ain't got no hands and can't slap your face."

"Well," said Paul, to John, and laughed, "you and Dave spend this afternoon with us, and about three-thirty I'll go out with the parade. I shan't be gone over an hour. If you want to take a carriage-drive around town, I'll get the rig."

"Nix on the barouche for me," said Dave. "None of them riding gags for little Davy."

"Well, then, you can stay here, and I'll get back about four-thirty. A little later we'll all go out to dinner and you can come to the show afterwards."

Madeline approved this heartily. "That's fine, Paul. We'll stay right here." She was hungry for her father's company and looked at him with a delightful smile. "Now it's all settled, father. Both you and Dave can take your coats off and be perfectly at home."

"Well, what do you decide about that!" was Dave's disgusted comment.

"Come, Dave," Paul urged, "join the family. You can go where you please to-morrow." He, himself, was just a bit astonished at the ease with which he carried, now, what had promised to be a very difficult situation.

The suggestion of amusements for the morrow

somewhat surprised John. "Say," he asked Dave, "are we going to put up here for the night?"

"Are we!" Dave replied, in turn astonished. "What do you think I am? Do you expect me to travel over a hundred miles from home and not stay away all night? Not me! Nothing doing! Nix, not, nit!"

Madeline's delight was plain. "Certainly not, Dave. We wouldn't think of your going back to-night, and, what's more, father wouldn't go, anyway. Would you, dad?"

He grinned at her; she took his hand and led him to a chair. "Now give me your coat and sit right here."

"One minute, Madeline. I want to go across the street. I've been looking out of the window and I see a tobacco store down the way, a bit."

"Never mind that, Dad. Paul will get you what you want."

Her father arrested her endeavor to call Paul from where he stood with Dave. "No; he *won't* get what I want." He leaned toward her and whispered furtively. "I want some cheroots."

She smiled understandingly. "Oh, that's it. I'll have Dave get them for you. You go and talk with Paul. Oh, Dave come here a minute."

"What's the general orders?" said her brother, as he came to her.

"Dad wants some cheroots," she told him, confidentially. "Please get them for him. Here's the money." She handed him a coin.

He looked at it and grinned. "Here, come again.

They ain't as bad as that. Do you think the old man's a piker?"

Smiling, she gave him another coin.

Then there came a look upon his face which almost startled her. Even in the few weeks of her absence from the home the boy had matured rapidly. There was a man's look in his eyes, now. "And, say, Madeline, speaking about pikers, I'm not one, either. Take back your gold. The cheroots are on me." As he forced the coins into her hands he chucked her underneath the chin and grinned more broadly than before.

It gave her a new feeling toward him, but she coaxed him, none the less, knowing that he could not have much money. "But, Dave, I want to do this for Dad."

"Not at all; not at all. Me and Dad is in Springfield with our own roll. Keep the change in your kick." He turned nonchalantly to the others. "Bye, bye, people! Back soon."

She stood looking after him a second, puzzled, pleased, and then went to her father. "Oh, it's awfully good to see you and Dave, Dad. How do you think I'm looking?"

He held her hand, and, sitting down, pulled her close to him, after he had looked her over. "Well, I'll tell you, girl. Now that I come to have a good look at you I must say you've changed a bit. Them clothes sort of dazzled me, at first; but when I begin to get used to your face, 'taint got the color in it that it had at home. Where's them roses that used to be in your cheeks?"

"It's the travelling," Paul volunteered. "It's pretty bad at times. And the grub, up here in the pie-belt, is fierce." A sudden plan had popped into his mind, result of much consideration of the problem which, that day, had forced itself upon him. "It took me a long time to get used to it," he added, slowly, as he worked out details of his plan.

"Guess she's homesick," John suggested, which was precisely what Paul would have had him say. "Hey, Madeline? Wants to see her mother. Yes?"

"Yes, I *do* want to see mother, Dad; but I'll be all right when I get used to travelling. You mustn't worry about me." She stroked his hand. "I won't let you, Dad. Paul will take care of me. Won't you, Paul?"

There was an almost imperceptible suggestion of impatience in the drum-major's voice and face as he replied. He had hoped she would accept eagerly her father's plan. He was not tired of her, he was not even tiring of her, he assured himself, but, sometimes she got on his nerves. These *good* women, when you grabbed one off her pedestal, expected so much of you! "Of course," he answered, without much enthusiasm. "There's nothing too good for you. But your father's right. You've got to take it easy, girl. Don't try to do too much."

"But I'm not doing too much," she protested, struggling to conceal her fright. "I'll be all right, and the next time Dad sees me, I'll be as well as ever. I'm strong and I'm well."

The next time Dad saw her, she thought, that ceremony would have been performed. She knew,

and she knew Paul knew, that it was the delay of that which made her weak and nervous, which was breaking down her strength. How quickly Paul fell into the suggestion that she should go home! What—what——

He pressed the chance, however, and ignored her protest. "I didn't want to say anything about it," he told John, "but you're quite right. She's homesick."

Her father nodded. "That's the way it looks to me. Well, I don't blame her. Only been away from home a few nights in her life, before. By jingo" (he clapped his knee and rose), "that gives me an idea." He had not the least thought that the idea had been planted in his mind by what Paul had just said. It came to him as his own personal discovery. "What's the matter with her coming home for a spell? She can go back with me and Dave. Right?"

Paul was delighted. He jumped at the opening. "Now you're talking," he exclaimed. "That sounds good to me. She'll never be so near Alvatown again. That's the trick, the very thing." He knew that she was turning slowly toward him, and, for just a second, he hesitated at the thought of meeting her reproachful eyes. He knew, perfectly, what she would think of first—that ceremony. But there was a chance that it might be deferred, this way. She would not dare to protest too much. "How about it, Madeline?" he asked, and summoned the bravado which enabled him to face her.

"Funny it never occurred to me before," said Sneed.

Madeline was almost overwhelmed. She could not

speaking at all, nor think coherently. It was too terrible. Paul seemed to be inducing the unconscious John to act as his ally—to act as his ally in the postponement of what meant everything to her—meant everything! She looked at the minstrel dully.

"And you'll get a good rest," he went on, meeting her eyes squarely, defiantly, and speaking very heartily, in a voice which John thought, which he meant to have John think, thrilled with unselfishness. "I'll go down through the southern circuit, Maryland, Florida and the hot sections, and come back in about two months. That's a corking scheme. Say, Madeline, the food down there is the limit."

The mere lifelessness of the girl's face forced him to an instant's pause, but he went on quickly:

"And the railroad's rotten. You can't imagine what a snide country it is. Mosquitoes, chills, fever and one-night stands. I think you'd better visit the folks. Mr. Sneed, you've struck it."

John was well pleased with himself. "Kind of looks that way, doesn't it? What do you think, Madeline? Will you come with us?"

Madeline was stunned. "I don't know, Dad. Do you . . . want me?" It was clear enough that Paul did not! Her voice was dead.

"You bet we want you." His tone thrilled with feeling. "We want you from the bottom of our hearts. It ain't the same old home since you left."

The access of emotion made him nervous, his nervousness demanded the solace of tobacco. He looked toward the door.

"Where's Dave? He's taking an infernally long time. Guess I'll have to go out as a relief expedition. Just you two think that idea over. I'll be back presently." Then he spoke especially to Paul. "You'll excuse me, Paul. I've got a little business to attend to. Talk her into it. We need her more than you do, now. And a few days with her mother will brace her up, all right. Talk it over between you. I think it's best for her." He went to her and took her hand. "And it's a fact, Madeline, you do look a little fagged. Better come." He started toward the door. "Fix it, Paul."

After he had gone, Paul looked at her nervously. It had been comparatively easy to propose the scheme and urge it when her father had been present and she had been unable to protest with the real arguments; but now that he was there alone with her, her eyes made him quail.

She did not speak at once, but, with her eyes downcast and her mouth drooping, slowly crossed the room and sank dejectedly into a chair. He nervously took out a cigarette and lighted it, then running his ringed fingers through his hair, prepared for the storm. But still she did not speak. At length he broke the silence in the best way he could think of.

"Hope you're satisfied. The wedding gag worked."

She did not look at him; her eyes, unseeing, were fixed indefinitely upon distance. Her voice caught, broke, almost sobbed, but did not, quite. "And now—you—want—to get rid of me!"

CHAPTER XIX

HE had recourse to bravado, endeavoring to escape responsibility.

"Your father suggested it."

"You want him to—take—me—home!" Still her voice was wet with unshed tears.

"I don't want you to go, but wouldn't it be better?" he said, temporizing.

"Home!" said she. "The only place in the world I dare not go!" She spoke slowly, thinking of the past. Then, roused: "If Dad knew that I—but I lied to him." There was scorn of self, almost self-loathing in her voice. "I—lied—to—him! For the first time in my life I looked into his face and deceived him. I thought lies, I lived lies, I spoke lies. . . . Oh, when he knows! . . . God!"

"When he knows!" Her words filled Paul with terror. "You will tell him?"

She did not answer and he fought down his rising panic.

"I won't," he assured her. "He doesn't even suspect. Haven't I done everything I could to protect you and make it look right? Make the best of it."

But on her face there was a look of terrible regret, unforgettable remorse. It frightened him anew. He

did not know to what lengths of bald revelation it might lead her.

"Come, little girl," he urged. "I love you, all right. Can't you see I do? I never loved anybody like I love you." His cheap soul thought this might impress her now, as it had oftentimes before. "Why," he added, "there isn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for you, Madeline."

She paid no attention to him. "Some day he will know," she went on, in her even, lifeless, terrifying voice, "unless you——" The voice broke and she gave him her hand convulsively.

He did not keep her hand in his, but, rising, let it fall limply to her side. "Madeline, be sensible. What *can* I do, now? Nothing. We've got to brazen it out. You and I leave Springfield to-morrow morning, while Dave and your father return to Alvatown and——" He could not continue calmly; the situation was too much for him. He dropped the sentence, incompleted. "Oh, hell!" he exclaimed, and, with a gesture of disgust, walked from her.

"Mother! . . . Home!" said Madeline, in the press of bitter musings.

"What is it?" he said, snarling with annoyance. "She will be told that you are looking well and that you are happy."

She sank into a seat. "Another lie!"

"Aren't you happy?"

"Happy?" she looked up at him with real surprise that he should have put the question. "How can I be, Paul? Oh, God, why do you ask me such questions?"

What is happiness? It is not deceit, not falsehood, not the life I live now! . . . Why did you do it?"

He was helpless, and made a gesture, now, of hopelessness. "Great heavens, Madeline!"

It was continually evident that she did not mean or wish to criticise him. "No; forgive me," she exclaimed. "I don't mean that. I am to blame, not you. I didn't mean to say that." Her regret was obviously bitter. "I didn't; I didn't."

He saw in this phase of her mood a ray of hope. He went to her. "Then why are you not patient? I can't marry you in any of these jay towns we are passing through, now. The minute I got a license it would be in the papers and then your folks would get wind of it, and—well, you know what would happen." He plainly recognized the speciousness of his own argument, but continued it. "Why don't you look on this thing like a sensible woman?"

She made no answer, made no movement, did not even raise her eyes to meet his worried gaze.

"*Damn it!* Give me a chance to do this thing properly! Wait till we get back to New York. It won't be long."

Still she did not offer any comment, and, after an instant's puzzled study of her face, he digressed suddenly. "Well, what about the little visit home? Make up your mind."

It did not rouse her; she gave the impression, at the moment, that she had quite passed the point where to arouse her would be possible. Her voice remained as dead as ever. "I can't go home. I can't look at

mother. She would know. None of us ever lied to her." She paused, for a time, in thought. "Suppose she, instead of father, had come here to-day. Just imagine that, if you can!" She shook her head. "No, no; not home. Before I had been there an hour she would know. I dare not; I dare not."

He had no words ready at the moment with which to combat this, and remained silent as she paced the room, and, finally, paused before the dresser.

"I can only go back to her as your wife," she went on, slowly. "If not that I don't know where I can go. . . . There is nothing so terrible as—truth. . . . I don't want to think about it, now."

Mechanically she let her eyes rove over the ranked pictures on the mantel. They paused when resting on the portrait of her mother.

"See, Paul; see?" she asked, and, as she spoke there came into her voice a thrill of actual terror. She cowered from the photograph as from a living countenance, reproaching her. "She is looking at me!" The illusion, evidently, was quite real, for she hurried to him, to shrink, terrified, into his arms. "Hide me. I can't stand it! Don't let her see me. . . . She knows! . . . She knows!"

Even the minstrel was impressed by her great agony, and he embraced her with some show of tenderness, clasping both his arms around her and patting her shoulder comfortingly. She shrank, sobbing against his breast.

"Yes, yes," he said, bewildered, worried. "You mustn't cry. I'll stick by you. Brace up." He looked

behind him nervously, letting his eyes linger, for a second, in acute apprehension, on the door. "Your father will be back in a minute."

"Oh, Paul," she begged, "don't—don't let father take me home with him! Promise me you won't let me go! Please, please!"

He did not directly promise, but, as usual, temporized. "I'll fix that all right," he said. "Now, don't worry." Suddenly he made a show of fine affection, unreal, plainly meant to pacify her. "Give me a kiss and—keep your head." He lightly touched his lips to her pale forehead, while she clung, distraught, in his encircling arms.

The sound of someone at the door made them spring apart as nervously as if they had been bashful sweethearts, although upon their faces, after they had separated, there were no traces of embarrassed smiles, or anything but worriment and nervousness. Her father noticed this phenomenon as he came in.

"Hello, what's this?" he asked, astonished.

"She's a bit unstrung," said Paul, explaining in the first word which occurred to him. "That's a woman's way of showing her happiness. To see you and Dave again was too much for her."

Madeline went from him to her father's arms. "What would I do without you, dear old Dad?" she cried. "Will you forgive me for leaving the family?" She looked at him with searching eyes and much bewildered him. "Hug me, Dad; hold me tight."

He was puzzled but impressed, and very anxious to in some way comfort her, to him, quite unaccount-

able distress. "We forgave long ago, Madeline," said he. "Long ago. You couldn't do anything wrong if you tried." But that he wholly failed to guess the situation's desperate seriousness was made evident when he exclaimed, somewhat facetiously: "Bless you, my children," laying his big hands, one on her trembling shoulder, one on Paul's, as though in benediction. He was now smiling cheerfully.

They stood thus as David entered. "I'll bet you two plunks," said the boy breezily, "that the White Sox put the crimp in the Red Sox, to-day, in Boston." He held a late edition of an evening paper in his hand. "I see that the Dodgers are out to swipe the sleepers in Beantown. What a walk-over for the Brooklyn bunch! If it rains they'll swim in, and if it's dry you can't see 'em for dust." The mere fact that no one commented upon his sporting news did not disturb him or induce him to digression. "I've got one nice, clean, crisp, crackling silver certificate that Brooklyn wins and that them Beaneaters don't get away from the home-plate." He scarcely looked at anyone. "Say, Madeline, lend me your shears. I want to carve a little dope for the circulating library of race-track and baseball literature."

Absorbed in his reflections on the world of chance, he sank to a seat, threw off his coat, lighted a cigarette, raised his feet until they rested on the carving of a mantel-pillar and proceeded to prepare for work.

All this gave Madeline an opportunity to grip herself, regain control, think.

"All right, David," she said quietly, and going to her dresser got the scissors for him.

"Thanks, Mrs. Churchill," said he nonchalantly.

"Did you get those cheroots for dad?" she asked, sotto voice.

He nodded. "Got a pocket full. I'll slip 'em to him when I get a chance. And say, Madeline, won't you hand me that little bunch of data from the outside pocket of my coat? No; the other side."

She fumbled for the clippings and secured them for him.

"That's the way to have 'em trained, Paul," he said loudly, gayly.

"How do you like this town, Dave?" Paul inquired, making talk.

"N. G. Too much noise. But" (he sat up suddenly), "I saw a dog up the street that looked like Roosevelt. Wasn't quite as classy, but he had some sure enough style, just the same. Ever own a dog, Paul?"

"No."

"Didn't never have one of the muts come up and put his cold nose against your hand and look up in your face and sort of ask you to pet him?" He smiled, pleasantly reminiscent.

"Not me." Dogs, plainly, did not interest the minstrel.

Dave smiled with greater feeling. "Never woke up in the morning after doing the big sleep and found old Towse wagging his tail against the bed-post, just about bug-house for a few kind words?"

"Never in *my* bedroom," Paul replied, with emphasis.

Dave now looked at him with earnest curiosity. It was as if, by these strange questions, he was searching the man's soul, and by his answers learning things about that soul which astonished and distressed him. "Don't like to have one curl up in your lap and let you scratch his ear?"

Paul shook his head, indifferently.

"I suppose you hate to have one follow you around and just about throw a fit of joy when you speak to him. Is that right? Can't see it?" He had raised his body now, and was sitting in an attitude of close attention.

"No," said Paul, with unmistakable finality. "Don't care for dogs."

David, evidently, had learned all he cared to know and more. The little cross-examination which Paul had looked upon as casual, trivial, had plainly meant much to the big, careless, sport-loving youth, and when he spoke again there was a new tone in his voice which made his father, Madeline and even Paul look at him in amazement. From his face, as he regarded Paul, the hero-worship which had glowed in it, in times past, when he had looked at him, had faded. Acute disappointment, disapproval, took its place. "Then," said he, very slowly, "you don't care for nothin'." After an almost imperceptible pause he added: "And you must be lonesome as hell!"

Whereat he turned once more to his newspaper, with

no further interest in Paul, and immediately became absorbed in sporting news.

"Did you get the cheroots Dave brought for you?" Madeline asked Sneed, seeing that he had been near Dave's coat, and anxious to converse quickly.

"S-s-s-h!" said Sneed, with a quick glance at Paul, who, after Dave's discourse upon dogs, had indifferently gone over to the window and stood there, looking at the street. "You bet. Don't say a word to Paul. I'll smoke 'em to-night in my room." Then he looked long and earnestly into her eyes. "Madeline, are you coming home with us?"

"I don't know, Dad," she was in an agony of indecision. "Wait until to-morrow. Perhaps."

Dave now had finished, for the moment, his rough survey of the sporting-world's events, and threw the paper down.

"Madeline," he called, "come over here and let's have a look at you. Let's have a talk."

It was a relief to her. She dreaded both their eyes, but Dave's much less than her father's. "All right. Paul, you tell father about the fine business we've been doing." She went to Dave and seated herself near him. "Tell me about mother and Ruth, Dave. Are they well?" There was a wistful yearning in her eyes, a hunger in her voice, which he did not miss or mistake. It pleased him.

"Both looked good to me, Madeline," he answered. "Going well and looking fit." Then, suddenly, with increased earnestness: "Say, what did you skip out for, anyhow? We didn't look for you to do that.

Wasn't there nothing at home good enough for you to couple up with?" He thought back along his old-time list of favorites among the local youth. "How about Steve Weldon?"

"Oh, Dave, you know I didn't care for Steve."

"No, I suppose not," he agreed. But there was acute dissatisfaction on his face, a growing suspicion that perhaps she had not done much better. He jerked his head toward Paul. "How about the tall guy?"

She did not answer promptly; he persisted.

"Is *he* right? Will *he* do? He don't get by with me so very strong. We don't know anything about him." His voice became extremely earnest. "Don't care for dogs."

"Why, father knew his father. What more do you want?"

Dave went back to his newspaper and clipped a half column raggedly, from it before he answered. "Aw, come off! Dad knows a whole lot of other fellow's dads. And most of 'em are dubs." He leaned over to her and spoke confidentially. "Say, Madeline, tell me about the wedding. Where did you pull it off?"

The girl turned her face away a little, struggling hard to keep composure. "In New York."

He nodded. "In a hotel, or a church?"

She was exquisitely uncomfortable. She had expected to be questioned in this matter by her father, and had prepared herself to answer, but had not been put through the ordeal. The questions now from Dave, who, she had thought, cared little and thought

less about such matters, surprised and disconcerted her. "Why, a church, of course," she answered.

"What church?"

She turned nervously to Paul. "Paul, dear, what church were we married in? Dave wants to know."

Paul did not look toward her, but answered cheerfully and glibly: "The Little Church Around the Corner."

This seemed, to Dave, to be facetious. "Around what corner?" he inquired sarcastically.

An unfriendly look had come upon his face. It seemed to Madeline as if he thought Paul had guyed him in his answer. He rose from his chair, looking steadily at him, and an ugly gleam came to his eyes. Paul cowered a bit, but summoned obvious bravado to his support; Madeline was frightened.

"Can I ask you a question?" Dave said sternly.

"Why, certainly," Paul answered, watchful, nervous.

"Will you tell me the truth?"

Madeline, alarmed, rose and put a light, detaining, tremulous hand upon his arm. He shook it off.

"Why, of course," Paul answered, trying not to shrink.

"I'm going to slip one over that will worry you some," said Dave, in a stern voice, a voice so stern that Sneed was interested and impressed and worried, also. He hurried to his son's side anxiously, wondering what could have happened.

"And I don't want you to stall," said Dave. "None of the bunk stuff goes now with me."

Paul stared at him, wordless, wondering, alarmed.

"Shall I start it?" Dave inquired. "Have you got a chill?"

"Well, what is it?" Paul asked anxiously.

Dave threw his cigarette behind him into the fancy grate; Madeline, her breath quickened into little gasps, approached him, almost in a panic.

"Which of those minstrel stiffs you brought to our town pinched my dog?" said Dave, and searched the drum-major's soul with stern, inquiring eyes.

To Paul and Madeline it was as if an object, supposed to be a bomb, had proved to be an orange in disguise. She sank into a chair; he made, after a blank moment, a gesture of disavowal and turned indifferently away, just as a boy came to the door, and, when he opened it, handed him a telegram. He looked at it and turned back to the others, reading its address. "Mr. John Sneed, care Paul Churchill, Hotel, Springfield, Mass." He handed it to John. "This is for you."

"Beats everything," said Sneed, and grinned, "how the government keeps track of me!"

Slowly he tore the envelope, then put on his glasses and took out the enclosure. He had tried to appear nonchalant, but as he read, a look of real anxiety vanished from his face and gave place to an expression of contentment.

Madeline, too, had plainly been alarmed. When she spoke, even now, after she had seen his face change, her tone of unconcern was forced. "What is it, father?"

He let his hand drop to his side and looked at her across his glasses-tops. "What do you suppose it is?" He turned from Madeline to Paul and questioned him, also, with his eyes.

"Haven't the least idea."

Now John's face beamed brilliantly. He could no longer hide his satisfaction. "Well, what is the most welcome piece of news that could come to you two, now?"

"Why—why, I don't know," said Madeline, nonplussed. "What?"

"Someone's going to lick Johnson?" Dave inquired.

"Shut up," his father ordered in disgust, and turned to Madeline. "What would you wish for most now if your wish could come true?"

"Really, father," said the girl, bewildered. "I don't know."

"Well, I've got a piece of news, on this yellow paper here, that can't be beat."

"Yes?"

"Your mother is coming on the 12:30 train."

CHAPTER XX

MOTHER!"

Madeline's eyes closed, weakly. She swayed upon her feet. Gropingly she caught the window-frame. When her eyes opened, she stared at Paul with terror in her face.

"Whoopee! Whoopee!" cried Dave. "Mother's coming!"

He sprang from his chair, clutched his dismayed sister's waist and circled with her in a mad whirl, successfully resisting with a grip of iron all her efforts to disengage herself. Unconscious of the horror of the moment to her, he dashed around the room, with small regard for chairs or human occupants. Her father, as unconscious as the boy was of the tragedy which shadowed Madeline, stood smiling at them for a moment, then pulled a cheroot out of his pocket, disregarding Paul, forgetting his dislike of the peculiar odor of that brand of tobacco, lit it and puffed avidly.

"Now that you've had your fit, Dave," he said when the young man, breathless, had subsided, "hadn't some of us better go down to the train to meet your mother?"

"I'll go; what time is it? The depot's only around the corner. Won't take long."

Madeline caught desperately for breath. Wild

thoughts were scurrying through her mind. "Wait, David," she said hurriedly. "I want to see mother first."

"I think Dave better go," Paul interjected.

"No," Madeline said firmly, turning toward him. "You and I will meet her. She comes here to see *me!*" There was a ring in the girl's voice which told him that he must not question her decision.

Her father nodded with approval. "That's what she does, Madeline, sure's you're born." He pulled out his great, old-fashioned silver watch. "And you haven't got much time to get there. Hurry up, Paul. David and I will stay here till you get back."

Madeline picked up her hat, waited while Paul somewhat reluctantly got his, and, with "Wait for us," to the others, hurried from the room.

Dave and his father smiled at one another cheerfully. "Won't that be the greatest reunion ever seen on that depot-platform!" John predicted, happily.

"Hanged if I can see why Madeline wanted to take Paul down there, anyhow. Why didn't she let me go?" Dave was impatient for a glimpse of his mother's face.

"I notice it didn't take much to stop you," was his father's comment, accompanied by much smoke from the cheroot and a wide grin.

"I figured mother sees enough of me at home."

"Same here." Sneed settled back, with comfort, into an easy chair. "You know, Dave, I think half the pleasure of going away from home must be the joy of getting back. I'm—sick of this place, already.

I'll be as glad to see your mother as Madeline is."

"Yes," said Dave, sarcastically feigning sadness. "It's a sorry story for an old man to stay away from the roost over night." He had small tendency to talk sentiment with his father. Race-track discussions seemed more natural.

"It's all right for you to joke, Dave," John rejoined reflectively, "but I think the greatest line in the English language is, 'There's no place like home.' Oh, well——"

He picked up the evening paper, and, after a moment, burst into laughter. "Here's another wallop for the plu-toc-ra-cy!" he gloated. "Listen to this, Dave. 'Ran away with her chauffeur. Beautiful daughter of Millionaire Melville Dalton, the banker, elopes with thirty-dollar-a-week machinist. Father, in hot pursuit, declares he will cast the girl out of his life and out of his will.'"

He threw the paper down and looked up at his son. "Serves him damned well right!" he cried, allowing his loathing of the rich full play. "By jingo, that sort of luck just about evens things up between the rich and the poor. Poverty ain't the worst thing in the world, after all. Chances are the old swine kept her chained up, more or less, and she broke out the first chance she got. You can't tell me that money brings happiness." He chuckled audibly, contentedly. "I'm a *poor* man and I needn't worry about any crazy chauffeur breaking up *my* family!"

"You can't sometimes always tell, dad," said his

son. "Maybe *I* might get to be one of those devil-wagon drivers and pull off a duck with some high society dame. It's been done before now, and, usually there ain't no come-back."

"Well, Dave, if you ever run away with a million-aress I won't expect you to come back." The old man laughed and looked Dave over wisely. "But you might leave your address with me."

"Won't have any address," said the son. "We'd simply be upon the way and going some." For a time both men read in silence, but Dave's train of thought remained unbroken, upon matrimony. "Say, Dad," he asked, at length, "what do you think of Madeline's wedding, anyhow?"

"Suits me, all right, if Madeline's satisfied, and she appears to be. What business is it of mine? A woman makes her bed and lies upon it. When you tie up to a party, stick to it. Them's my politics."

"She don't look happy to me," said Dave, thoughtfully. And then, reflectively: "He's a dog-hater."

"What are you talking about?" John surveyed Dave with attentive interest.

"That's what I said. How can she be happy? This piking around the country on these one-night-stands is rotten bad. Madeline ain't used to it."

This did not impress his father, who lounged back in his chair again uninterested. "You'd better not butt into her business with any advice. She won't thank you for it. She'll be all right after she sees her mother." He looked at his watch and rose, strolling to the window. "Where the devil are they?"

As he turned back he almost ran against Paul's bearskin hat, which stood beside the trunk. He paused, contemplating it, a second. "Say, Dave, this thing looks so intelligent I think I'll ask it a question."

"Oh, chop, Dad," Dave replied, again interested in his newspaper. "Sit down, sit down and let go."

"I won't sit down," said John with vehemence.

"Very well, stand up."

Instantly, with a sharp glance at him, his father sank into a chair.

David, smiling, resumed reading. "I see McCarthy rode three winners out of his five mounts, yesterday, at Aqueduct. Great jockey, McCarthy."

"Danny Maher has got him skinned to death. He's the boy that comes across with the money."

But race-track news was not, just at this moment, of absorbing interest to either man. They were away from everything familiar and wished for definite occupations. They felt that, being in strange places, they were entitled to excitement.

"I don't see why we're glued to this crib, anyhow," said Dave, impatiently.

"Where else can we go? Your mother will show up with Madeline and Paul, pretty soon, and if we ain't here they'll ring the fire-bells for us. Women, Dave, are like elections. You can't tell what's going to happen till the polls close."

"Forget it," Dave replied. "They wouldn't even miss us. Let's duck downstairs and roll a game of pool. Spot you five balls." Without waiting for an answer, he rose and slipped into his coat.

His father contemplated him, considering, then rose also. Madeline and Mrs. Sneed would want to be alone together, anyhow. "I'll just go you, Dave; we'll flip for the first shot."

"You're on, sport," said his son and flipped a coin. "Heads or tails? Best two out of three."

"Heads," said his father, and, as their eyes were fastened on the coin in mid-air, Mary Sneed came in.

She was timid in the unaccustomed elegance of the hotel, and her simple, old, dark gown, her soft felt hat with its black velvet bow-cluster, her thin, worn Persian shawl, the plain gold cross pinned to her breast and the worn black bag she carried looked out of place in such surroundings. In her hand she held a tea-rose, picked from the window-pot at home. She had turned the door-knob timidly and noiselessly, she had slipped in timidly and softly. The men did not hear her, as they stood, engrossed, above the coin which Dave had caught as it descended on its second fall.

"Tails," said Dave. "You lose. On your way, Dad." They looked up and saw Mary.

"The clerk downstairs," she timidly explained, "told me to come right up."

They hurried to her, welcoming.

"Well, you *are* the goods!" said Dave. "Did you come up from the depot alone?"

"Yes; I took the hotel bus. Where's Madeline."

John, delighted into unaccustomed gallantry, drew her shawl from her shoulders. "Why, she and Paul went down to the train to meet you," he explained.

"Didn't you see 'em? Come over here and sit down." His face was beaming. Even Dave had forgotten the pool-game. "I tell you, mother, she'll be glad to see you."

"Sit here, ma," said Dave, indicating the tete-a-tete. "These double-barrelled lounges are all to the horse-radish."

"Why didn't you bring Ruth?" John asked. "She'd have been tickled to come." He threw the bag and shawl upon the bed in the alcove. "I don't see how Madeline and Paul missed you." Dave took her hat.

"Aw, him and her is blind," he commented. "If they wasn't they wouldn't have married each other."

"Don't say that, David," said his mother, settling down. "They are husband and wife, now." Then she turned anxiously to John. "How does Madeline look, father?"

"Fine."

"Listen to Dad!" said Dave, incensed by the meagerness of his reply. "Why, you wouldn't know her. She's all lit up with Marcelline waves, a hat full of chicken-whiskers and a peek-a-boo waist. Swell!" He looked his mother over with affection and sat down beside her in the other section of the tete-a-tete. "Say, you look pretty good, yourself, ma. Anybody flirt with you?"

"David!" she reproached.

"Don't pay any attention to him, mother," said her husband. "It'll be ten years, yet, before Dave begins to act like a human being. You didn't tell me about Ruth."

"I did so want to bring her," said Mrs. Sneed, regretfully. "But she isn't hardly old enough to stand the trip."

"A hundred miles! Go on, ma." Dave laughed at her. "Before I forget it, ma, did Roosevelt show up? Oh, you dog!"

"No, David Roosevelt hasn't come home yet. But he will, I am sure. Well, as I was saying, Ruth couldn't have stood the trip, so I left her with the neighbors." She looked at John, gently worrying about her. "Can we get back to-night?"

"We can, but we *won't*," John said firmly. "Paul and Madeline want us to stay over——"

"And we're going to stay," said Dave. "You bet!"

"Well, where in the world are they?"

"Don't worry, mother; don't worry," said her husband. "They'll be along, soon. They're probably looking around the depot, and not finding you, they will come right back here to wait for the next train. Just you and Dave stay here, while I go downstairs and see about rooms for us. Back in three minutes."

"So your sister is married, David," she said gently to her son, after John had gone.

"Yes, on the fly," he answered. Then, discontentedly: "This kind of a marriage don't make much of a hit with me. Hopping around the country on one night stands with a bum minstrel show is all to the blink."

"But they will settle down, somewhere, later," she said, optimistically.

"Not!" he said, shaking his head. "Where can a man who can't do nothing but throw a nickel-plated club in the air settle down? What town would stand for him over one week?"

"Oh, he can do more than that."

"If he could, he would be doin' it."

"But he plays a part in the minstrel-show!"

"Yes; you saw him when he was in our town."

"I did, Dave, of course."

He spoke with much disgust. "Well, what did he say? 'Mr. Johnson, how are you this evenin'?' and 'Well, what *did* your brother say to you?' Then all the other coons come across with the old gags and Paul come back with: 'Mr. Harrington Hopton will now sing, "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep."'"

"Well, what of it? Isn't that part of the minstrel business?"

"*Part* of it!" he declared clamorously. "Why, that's *all* of it!" Then, carefully, he lit another cigarette.

"Well, I don't know, David," said his mother, worried, but not convinced by the boy's scorn. "She seems to have cared enough for him to take him for her husband. Perhaps it is all wrong. Still, young people have a way of pulling through. Your father wasn't much when I married him."

"And isn't yet," said Dave, bursting into roars of laughter.

John came in excitedly. "Played in great luck," he announced. "Got the room right next to this one. You can put your things in there, mother. Mighty

comfortable. Get those things off the bed, Dave, and hustle them into the other room."

"In a minute." With unwonted energy Dave gathered up the hat and bag and shawl and hurried to the door. But, as he passed Paul's mighty bear-skin hat stopped him, as it had stopped his father. He contemplated it, but not respectfully. "Say, Dad, be careful not to fall into this bunch of hair. Ain't it a fine lid for a dub who stands six feet high and weighs one-hundred-and-eighty pounds?" His scorn increased as he snarled at it: "Woof, woof! Lay down, Nero!" After a moment's pause he added just as he disappeared: "*That's* what Madeline married!"

"Go right in there, mother, and tidy up a little," Sneed urged, after a moment's pause, due to his son's outbreak. "Madeline and Paul will be coming along any minute now." He took her hand, with unwonted tenderness, to help her rise. As she did so the tea-rose fell, unnoticed, from her lap.

"Say, ma, I've got it," Dave declared, re-entering. "You duck into your room and when Madeline and Paul come they'll wonder where you are. Then me and Dad will say we haven't seen you at all. Are you on, Dad?"

He nodded, smiling at the thought of the surprise.

"And in a few minutes you sneak in here and give 'em a jolt. Madeline will just about go off her block when she sees you. Right, Dad?"

"Fine! A surprise! Come, hurry up, now. There's *everything* in there you need."

She nodded, smiling, and began to gather up her handkerchief and veil.

"Don't make any noise," John warned her, "and a few minutes after they get here, open the door between the rooms—see, there it is—and come in. Don't go around by the hall. We'll have this door unlocked." He paused, planning. "I'll give a loud laugh when it's time."

She agreed, but hesitated. "All right, Father; but when I hear her voice it will be hard for me to stay from her." She put her hand in emphasis upon his arm. "So don't keep me waiting."

"The first minute, surest thing you know, Ma," Dave assured her.

"Leave it to me, Mother," Sneed agreed, as he urged her toward the door, through it, smiled at her, and closed it. Then he turned back to his son.

"Guess we've got that fixed O. K. Now I'll tell you what to do."

"Let her go."

"Just as soon as Madeline and Paul come in, we'll get Paul to go downstairs with us, and leave Madeline here, alone. Then your mother will come out and——"

He stood there, thinking of the meeting between the two he loved so dearly, with a fine smile on his face.

"And there you are!" he added.

"Great! Just leave 'em here, alone."

"Exactly. That's what they'll want."

"Give 'em both a chance to bawl."

There came the sound of voices from the outer hall.

"S-s-h!" said John. "I hear them coming. Hit the chairs."

In haste they took careful counterfeits of careless attitudes in the room's easy-chairs. As Paul and Madeline came in they both feigned the very deepest interest in the newspapers they held and scanned, unseeing.

Paul seemed worried. Evidently Madeline had made him most uncomfortable with her own anxiety. "She didn't come," he told them.

"Is she here?" asked Madeline, evidently alarmed.

"You don't see her, do you?" Dave said in reply.

"We watched everyone get off the train, or thought we did," Paul explained carefully.

"And then we searched all through the crowd on the platform," Madeline added.

"Mebbe she'll come on the next train," John ventured, with a lack of interest which surprised the disappointed ones.

"Possibly," said Madeline, mechanically, but plainly not with any very brilliant hope, trying to fight back the bitter tears born of her disappointment.

"Suppose we go downstairs, you and Dad and me, Paul, and find out when the next train comes," was Dave's suggestion and John rose with alacrity.

Paul accepted the suggestion, also, very promptly. He had no desire to be alone with Madeline, when, to her other worries, this new one had been added. "Good idea. Be back in a little while, Madeline."

"You won't need us here, will you, girl?" said John,

a bit distressed by the mere appearance of deserting her when such acute distress was on her face.

"No, Father," she replied, trying to keep back her worry. "I'll wait." He nodded. She ran after him as he started through the door. "You're sure, aren't you, that she is coming?"

"Just as certain as the sunrise," he replied, as Paul and Dave went out. "She never fails any of us, Madeline." He smiled at her assuringly. "She couldn't stay away from you if she tried."

"Any more than you, Father," Madeline agreed, smiling at him with a wealth of love; trying to be gay.

It was in further effort to make him believe her to be happy that she called after him, as he, too, left the room:

"Be careful of the bunco-steerers, Dad."

"Sure; I'll sell them something." Laughing, he disappeared around a corner of the hallway.

Left quite alone the girl slumped wearily. The excitement of their coming, her trip to the railway station, her disappointment when she did not find her mother, and her worry had stimulated her, till now; but now she suddenly felt weary beyond the power of words to tell, almost, she thought, beyond her limit of endurance. Her head ached and her body ached, and most of all, her heart ached. Had she not fought them back, the tears now would have come in rushing floods. As she turned wearily away from contemplation of the litter Dave had left beside his chair, she saw, upon the floor, the tea-rose. Wondering, she stooped to pick it up, and as it fell to pieces in her

hand became dimly conscious of a presence other than her own. Looking up, in an indefinite, unconscious curiosity, she saw her mother standing, as if spell-bound, in the open door of the adjoining room, and, dumb for the second, heard her cry her name.

“M-o-t-h-e-r!”

“Madeline! Come!”

They rushed into one another's arms, and Madeline broke utterly, clinging to her mother with convulsive desperation, sobbing as if her heart were breaking.

“Daughter, daughter! There, there, there!” She caressed her as she had when she was little.

CHAPTER XXI

THE fear which Madeline had felt at thought of seeing her mother disappeared, as she sobbed there, on her breast; the longing for her, which had been so much stronger than the fear was satisfied and in the process yielded her the first real peace which she had known since she had met Paul Churchill on that afternoon which now seemed oh, so long ago, when, brilliant in his uniform, tempting in his difference from the young men she had known, he had begun to fascinate her.

"Have a good cry," said her mother, believing that the girl's outburst of tears was due wholly to her joy at seeing her. "And then dry your tears and tell me everything in your heart." She yearned down at her with that smile ineffable, that smile which only comes to mothers' faces, that smile which understands, excuses all. "We never understood you," she admitted, and this was both apology and an excuse. "How could we, Madeline? You see, you seemed still to be our little girl. But you were a woman and we did not know."

The girl's sobs decreased in violence. She patted her and thrust her back a little.

"Look at me, Madeline."

But the girl did not look at her. She raised her head a bit, raised it until it was entirely clear of the soft, comforting, shielding mother-shoulder; but, after she had done this, she kept her eyes turned from her mother's face.

"I did not know how dear you were to me," the girl said, choking, "until I had gone." She paused for a long time, thinking, thinking. For how much greater sin was she to ask forgiveness than the mother whom she was about to beg would know, or, if she knew, would credit? "Will—you—forgive me?"

"Hush!" said her mother, comfortingly. "You have our forgiveness and our blessing." Still her hands were on the loved girl's shoulders, still they were administering those little soothing pats, like those a mother gives a little wailing baby. "It would have been better to have taken me into your confidence; but it is now too late. Say no more about it."

"Yes, it is too late," said Madeline with a depth of meaning which her mother could not guess. "Nothing can be recalled." Then, battling for excuses: "Oh, mother, you must have known how weary I was! I saw nothing ahead. What . . . shall I do?"

"Do not speak of it. That has passed. It is to-day and the future that must occupy your mind—your husband."

Madeline again buried her flushed, sorry face in the beloved shoulder. Her "husband!" Oh, if her mother knew!

"I am not brave, mother," she replied.

Mary led her to the garish little tete-a-tete and they sat down. "You must be, my child. You are no longer one of five. You are the beginning of a family. The time has come for you to undertake those responsibilities." Her mind ran back in reminiscence of the first days of her own married life. She had not suffered as poor Madeline was suffering, but she had suffered, measureably, she thought, in the same way. "To-day you are a wife."

The girl turned her face guiltily away. "Wife! Wife!" Ah, that word, that word which meant so much! She clutched wildly at her heart, while her mother, utterly unconscious of the storm which raged in her rent bosom, went on, placidly:

"Dry those tears. Be brave. Some day, as I, with the blessing of God, you will be a mother." She smiled at her with an even greater sweetness than her face had shown before. "And your children will cling to you as have mine to me until it is destined that they shall leave you. There is no other way, Madeline."

It was more than the girl could bear. Try as she would to hide her sorrows and her sufferings from this best friend of all, try for her sake and her own, she felt that she was weakening. She could not accept this calm assumption that she had done no wrong except that of an impulsive girl. "Don't! Don't!" she cried, with an intensity of agony thrilling in her voice which filled her mother with astonishment and real alarm. "You're killing me! Let me stay back awhile. Wait, wait! Wait, mother! . . . Hold

me in your arms; hold me near you; near the family."

Mrs. Sneed looked at her, puzzled, trying to understand; and, failing, she took her hand and stroked it. "It shall be as you wish." Then, comfortingly: "I know you will be happy. To-day you are unstrung. But the sky will clear."

Madeline, the first storm of her emotion past, sighed wearily. "Say that you can and that you do forgive me for leaving you without a single word of farewell. Why did I do it?" She burst again into a storm of tears. "Mother! Mother!"

"You should not think of that. Then you were ours; to-day you are his. Both of us know, now."

"Oh," cried the unhappy girl, "I should have trusted you more, I should have given you my confidence. . . . But I withheld it. . . . I received . . . his letters . . . met him . . . he spoke of love . . . he was so tender . . ."

"And he won you away from us." The mother's heart was aching, fighting down its jealous pangs. She won the little battle, as so many thousand mothers, in so doubly many thousand instances have won it. "But that is life, and love."

"Wait, mother hear me! And so, longing to be free, to escape from that awful village, I went to him." She turned her face away again, but still clung to her mother's hand.

"And you promised," said her mother, with no thought of the agony her words would carry to the girl, with no thought that they were, of all words,



THERE WAS NO WEDDING RING UPON THE HAND THAT LAY LIMPLY IN HERS.

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those which must most certainly cut to her very heart, "to be his 'lawfully wedded wife.'" She was quoting with a smile—a very tender, reminiscent smile. "To 'love, honor and obey till death.'" "

The girl trembled as an aspen in a breeze from the cold north. She could not stand it; oh, she could not stand it! Now she even dropped her mother's hand and clasped both her own upon her face to hide it. "No; no!" she murmured.

Her mother did not understand; the dreadful truth did not impress her as a possibility. "Yes," she insisted. "Yes; my child, those are the very *words*. 'And with this ring'——"

The girl gasped in her agony of soul, dropped the screening hands, and sat there, white-faced, staring as if stricken with paralysis.

There was something in the pallor of her face, something in her tense, dreadful attitude, which, by some strange process, implanted in her mother's mind an inkling, an unbelievable suspicion of the truth. She caught her breath; then, as the conviction that this unbelievable suspicion *was* the truth swept over her, swayed beneath the horrid shock of it, as if she could not bear the blow of the terrific knowledge. There was no wedding ring upon the hand that lay limply in hers.

"Where is it, Madeline? *Madeline!*" she implored.

Madeline swayed and would have fallen from her seat had it not been for her mother's supporting arm.

"*The ring! The ring! Where is it?*"

After a moment's dreadful silence, during which she sat there with eyes shut, fighting from the tendency to look upon her mother's face, Madeline looked at her in a daze. Before articulate words came there issued from her trembling lips a thin, horrifying wail, a note of tragedy much greater than the tragedy of death. "Let me go!" she cried, then. "I can't look at you! Let me go!"

Her mother clung desperately to her. "Not now." They rose, struggling.

"You shall! You shall!" the girl exclaimed. "Let me go! I—I must get *away* from here! I must!" She pulled frantically in her efforts to liberate her hands. "I don't want you to hold me," she declared. "I—I don't want to look into your face."

"Whose face, then, can you look into?" asked her mother gently.

"None," she declared quickly. "You are—hurting me."

The mother's grasp gave not the slightest sign of loosening. "Your wounds are not so deep as mine."

Then, whether the girl would or not, she began to draw her nearer to her—draw her with the strength of desperation.

"I cannot let you go, Madeline. I am your mother. You need me, now!" She utterly released her and then held out her arms. "Come to me!"

The girl no longer shrank from her, but went to her, and, although she shuddered, sank into the enfolding arms, after one glance upward at the actual hunger showing on the fine old face.

"Can you . . . can you take me to you again?" she asked, wondering.

"And why not? Why——"

"I am not . . . his wife!"

This bald statement of the dreadful truth was very hard for Mary Sneed. She shrank back, overcome. "Oh . . . my . . . God!" Her own hands went, now, to her face; and then, as they came down and her glance fell upon the cowering girl: "My child!" She closed her arms around her and Madeline sank upon her breast. "My . . . little . . . Madeline!"

Thus, for a pregnant second, they stood there, and then the mother's eyes upraised toward Heaven. "Give me strength!" she prayed.

The girl clung desperately to her, her arms clasped tight about her neck, her face hidden hopelessly, her shoulders shaking from tremendous sobs. "Where . . . can . . . I . . . go . . . now?"

Her mother pressed her to her breast, held back her head and, after a long look into her face, kissed her on the lips. "Home, Madeline!"

"Oh——"

"We will go together. Come."

CHAPTER XXII

THE two had gone into the other bedroom when, a few moments later, Dave, thinking they had had enough time for their sentiment, came back. He looked around the empty room with a wise grin. Then called, softly: "Madeline!" Having no reply, he smiled more wisely still and hazarded: "I guess the soft stuff is coming off." He did not think or say this with contempt. The family affection was as strong in Dave as in any of the others, although he hid it more successfully than they could.

His mother heard him and came slowly through the door of the extra bedroom, closing it behind her, and, with a white, drawn face, standing with her back to it, as if to guard the miserable child within from all intruders.

"Yes, David?" she said, calmly.

"I stuck the old man at pool," the boy announced.

"Did you?" she inquired, and, before she left the door, turned the key in its lock and slipped it deep into the pocket of her skirt. Then she crossed the room with slow, firm tread, and sank upon the tete-a-tete.

There was something in her manner which alarmed her son, or, at least, tremendously astonished him. He wondered if the happiness of seeing her had made

Madeline ill, he wondered half-a-dozen things. "What is it, ma?" he asked.

She did not answer him, but sat there, gazing fixedly at him as though she did not see him, but as though his presence, none the less, suggested certain thoughts to her—thoughts which were unpleasant, worrisome. Then, slowly, the tears began to furrow down her face—a face, which, as he looked at it, seemed years older than it had before he went downstairs, leaving her alone with Madeline.

"You cryin'?" he asked quickly, in distress. "Don't do that, ma." Only once or twice, in all his life, had he seen her in tears. She had been the strong one of the family—the one who never yielded to emotion, who always managed to control herself, no matter what had happened. He awkwardly patted her upon the shoulder.

She took his hand, but did not lower the handkerchief which she pressed to her eyes. "David," she said solemnly, "sit down by me, and listen. I . . . need you, now. I am in . . . trouble." She did not say that Madeline was in trouble; she made the trouble, as she tried to make the burden, all her own.

Dave looked at her very anxiously. "What kind of trouble?" he inquired. "Say, put me on." He paused. Then: "Anything the matter with Madeline?"

She nodded her head miserably. "Yes. . . . With Madeline."

"And the drum-major?"

Again she nodded miserably. "And the drum-major."

He rose, the bright light of a great wrath shining in his eyes. "What's he done to her? Tell me! What's he done to her?"

"My son," she said, appealingly, "you must not lose your temper."

His face, which had become as hard as nails, did not soften at this warning.

"Come here; close to me," she urged, and took his hand again, pulling him down to the seat beside her. "Where is your father?"

"Downstairs, watchin' the pool-game."

She was not ill-pleased by this. "He must not know why," she said slowly, thoughtfully, "but we must take Madeline home with us, right now." She looked keenly at him. "Do you understand me, David? . . . Do you?"

He did not, in the least. "What'll Churchill say?" he asked.

"It isn't important, what he says, David." She spoke very firmly, with her eyes still fixed in inquiry upon his face, waiting, waiting, to see how he took it. "This is—my affair. I don't want to see him again."

He shook his head. He could understand, he thought, just how she felt. His own dislike of Churchill had become acute. But one could not be high-handed. The law, he reflected, gave a husband rights. "Well, he's her husband," he said slowly, "and you can't beat that. If he says nix, it's nix."

She turned her face away from him and touched her damp, crumpled handkerchief to her eyes again. "Well, it isn't that, this time, David."

He did not comprehend, at all, and was beginning to be annoyed by all this mystery. After looking at her non-committal face a second, searching for an explanation, he demanded, petulantly: "What's all this about, anyway? Put me next."

"Only this, David," she replied. "Madeline is going home with us." How she was fighting to keep back the truth!

"To . . . stay?" he asked, infinitely puzzled.

"To stay," she said, reluctantly.

Wrath stirred in him again. Had the minstrel-man abused her? Was he planning to desert her? Was he—was he—"Has he throwed her?"

The poor woman was at her wits' ends. She could not, she saw plainly, longer temporize with him. "Not that, David," she said, shaking her head. "But she . . . hasn't any other . . . place to go."

Still he did not understand. "That's what I told Dad." He nodded, most unhappily, but as if he were not in the least surprised. "These minstrel-men ain't got no homes. . . . And there you are." He was thinking back, reflecting on his sister's great mistake in looking beyond Alvatown for a husband. "Why, even Steve Weldon has got a bungle-oh, that acts like a home, anyhow."

She was finding all this very difficult—by far the most difficult thing which she had ever had to do. He would not understand; he would not understand! And when he did, what would he do? "You don't understand, David," she said, nervously. "If you'll listen a moment——"

"Oh, I understand. When the season closes I suppose we'll have Mr. Nickel-Stick boarding with us, free—of—charge. I understand, all right. That's what. He's a piker."

"No, David; Madeline will never see him again."

Wrath blazed in him again. "Oh, she won't? Then he *has* throwed her!"

She bowed her head again, again held the handkerchief to her wet eyes.

The light broke on him suddenly—and smote him. "I'm on! I'm on!" he cried, and his face purpled. "They ain't married! They ain't married!" His voice choked with the words as if they had been hot and clogging. "The—damned skunk! *He's ruined her!*"

The expression of his face alarmed her. She hurried to him, throwing a restraining arm around his neck as if she feared he might, upon the instant, start out in the search for him who had so wronged his sister.

"By God, I'll kill him!" he exclaimed, and there was now upon the face of David Sneed no indolence, no boyishness, no inefficiency. It was as if, in that short minute, he had become a man. "He's ruined her!" said he, again. "That's what he's done!"

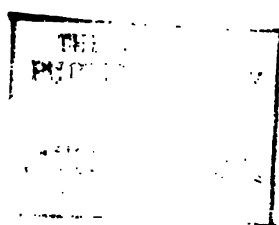
"David! David!" said his mother, trying desperately to calm this son, who, it appeared, had in him unguessed depths of passion.

But she could not soothe him. He was beside himself, and with a few strides went half way across the room, half dragging her, although he did not seem



"LET ME GO! I'VE GOT TO GO OUT AND KILL HIM, AND NOTHIN' CAN STOP ME."

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to know it, because she would not loose her hold upon him.

The lust for vengeance suddenly alight in him, seemed uncontrollable. He frightened her until she could not even scream as, with another step or two, he reached the room's bay-window and with his bare fist thrust one sash out utterly. Her terror-stricken ears could hear the shattered glass a-tinkle on the pavement, far below. He seemed to be unconscious of her, wholly.

"He can't do that, to her!" he cried. "He can't do that to her!"

Then, at last, as she clung, sobbing, inarticulate, in her great fear, he seemed to realize for the first time since his mad rage had been upon him, what it was that hampered him. He looked down at her impatiently. He seemed to stand six inches taller than he ever had before; his face had gained stern lines—a terrible expression, quite mature.

"Let me go!" he cried. "They ain't nothin' else to do!" He was working with her toward the door, which scared her even more than it had scared her to have him rush so toward the window. "I've got to go out and kill him and nothin' can stop me!"

His hand was now upon the door-knob and he pulled and jerked it frantically. When it refused to open he tore and kicked at it.

"Give me the key!" he cried. "The key!"

"No, no, no!" the frantic woman pleaded. What new trouble might be brought upon their house if

he was not restrained? "You shan't stain your hands with human blood!"

The words seemed to fairly madden him, and he thrust her from him with such force that almost she fell prone. She caught herself in time, though, and once more grappled with him, begging, struggling.

"Yes; I will!" he cried. "I will!"

He began to sob, hysterically, in the futile fierceness of his fury, but this did not reassure her; she sprang to him, renewing her hold on him.

"I'll kill th' dog while he's leadin' th' parade!" he cried. "He ain't big enough, or strong enough, to save himself."

She clapped her hand upon his mouth. What if these wild threats should be heard by some one in the hall? What might they not do to him for their utterance? "Hush, David! In God's name, be silent! If you love me, be still!"

She made no impression on him, whatsoever. He caught her hand and held it from his mouth. "I'll take him by the throat, with my naked hands, and kill him before all the people!" he declared. "Then I'll beat his head into a pulp with his baton! *L-e-t—me—go!*" The words were spoken with a wrench, as he strove desperately to free himself.

And as they struggled there rose to them from the street the music from the minstrel-band, approaching on parade.

"David!" she pleaded, desperately. "It is me you will kill! I cannot live through this." She was white-faced and gasping, her lips were blue from fright and

strain. "Unless you cease, David, you have done for me."

It made no impression on him, and, once more, he struggled with her toward the window. "There he is! I'll kill him, now! Take your hands off my neck! Let me get out of here! He don't deserve to live."

"No, David. Son, look at me."

He would not, but was working, careful, as by instinct, not to hurt her, but slowly, slowly, loosening her hold on him.

"Oh, God! David, listen! Two wrongs can't make a right. You will only make a terrible scandal, through which I cannot live."

Something in this speech appealed to him, or the first frantic fury of his wrath had passed. At any rate, he suddenly relaxed and stood there, pale and trembling violently, but no longer the stark madman with whom she had been struggling.

"Well, what'll people think o' me?" he asked harshly. "Why won't you let me get him? Don't you know what he's done to her?"

"No one shall know," she urged him. "Promise me you will do nothing. David . . . Dave . . . swear it! Give me your word of honor . . . Do this much for me."

His fury was spent, now; his hands fell to his sides, his shoulders drooped, the muscles of his face relaxed. "Whatever you say, ma." He was again the David she had known. "But it's askin' too much of me. The damned, dirty whelp! Is he goin' to go free?

Ain't anything goin' to happen to him? . . .
What'll . . . Dad say?"

"He will know in good time," she said, wearily. "I shall tell him in my own way. It . . . must all be left to . . . me."

Completely overcome, David sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands, his shoulders shaking in a wild hysteria of boyish grief. It tortured her, but far less than his fury had.

"How long must I keep my hands off him?" he asked, suddenly, looking up at her, aggrieved. "Is he to be let alone, while Madeline comes home to pay for it?"

"There is a Divinity that shapes all ends, Dave," she said, solemnly.

He nodded and held out his arms to her. She stumbled toward him and clung to him. They stood, thus, weeping, for a moment. Then:

"Go to her, David; comfort her. She needs a brother, now."

He nodded, starting toward the other bedroom door, but as he went another thrill of rage swept over him. His teeth clenched and he shook his fist toward the direction into which the passing music had departed.

"If God *don't* punish him, I *will*!"

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW Mary Sneed contrived things, during the next few hours, she, least of all those whom she managed, could have told; but with the strength and ingenuity born of her desperation, she did manage them, and managed them so well that long before Paul returned to the hotel, she and Madeline and Dave were on the train, bound home to Alvatown. And the Madeline who went from the hotel was very different from her who, with Paul Churchill, had entered it, for she was dressed in all the unpretentious, cheap, simplicity of the costume in which she had fled from Alvatown to join him. Everything which he had purchased for her, everything which she had purchased for herself with money he had given her, was left behind, as she so desperately wished that she might leave behind even her memories of him. The note which went to him by messenger was of a nature which made him extremely careful not to see John Sneed before he, too, took a train for Alvatown, in response to messages left for him with the clerk of the hotel, so Sneed, hurrying home by the next train, knew only that a sudden whim had seized the women-folks; a sudden uncontrollable nostalgia which they could not resist. He was, him-

self, a little homesick; he was delighted to believe his daughter had been overwhelmed by longing for the family roof-tree; he was well content. Churchill, warned not to see him, took care to heed the warning, and so the old man left quite ignorant of all that had occurred.

The strategies and subterfuges resorted to by Mary Sneed, the pleadings, urgings, warnings, with which she got Dave on the train without a search for Paul comprised one of those tremendous triumphs which, unrecorded though they may have been, have made mothers the world's greatest generals and victors since the world began. And on the train she had another battle of another sort—a battle to arouse the pride of her unhappy, disenchanted daughter, and make her really want to start life quite anew, with hope, real hope, for future days.

In this she found, to her surprise, an able seconder in Dave. The boy had marvelously developed during the few hours of crisis there in Springfield. His face had knit together into firmness; his fingers, even, had grown tense and worthy of real work. The boy had sadly needed something to awaken him, and he had found that something in the tragedy in which his sister had become involved.

At home, in Alvatown, again, the mother found her opportunities—her mighty, puzzling, almost unbelievable necessities—for finesse and generalship, and she met them all and conquered all of them, with strength and wit descended on her from a source of power invisible but inexhaustible. She read her Bible, con-

stantly, these days, whenever she could get an opportunity.

Aroused, Dave found himself amazed by what his waking eyes revealed to him of his own character. "Gee, Dave!" he told himself, out in the hammock, as he surveyed the ragged, unkempt lawn, "ain't you the Great, Unparalleled, Prize-winnin' Slob of the Mammoth Three-ring Human Exhibition! Look, there, at that grass. Say, the Sneed place has got whiskers fit to daze a Populist."

With sudden energy he went round behind the house to get the lawn-mower, but, coming on it, found it had been broken long ago—a fact which he had known but had forgotten. A shrewd eye told him it would cost two dollars for repairs, and as he had two dollars, only, in his pocket, he decided instantly against it. He had not bought a ticket on the ponies since he had come back from Springfield, because he had been quite too busy thinking about Madeline and Paul to give attention, even, to the race-track dope, but that two-dollar-bill was in reserve for just such usefulness. He went back to the hammock and lay down again; but another survey of the lawn annoyed him. He turned his back upon it, and let his gaze rest on the clapboards of the house. They were chalky and unpleasant with old, disintegrating paint.

"Say," he complained, "I get a pain no matter where I look. I can't paint the house, but I can cut that grass, if I have to play I am a cow and bite it off."

He gave himself no time for argument, but hurried for the lawn-mower, hastened downtown with it, had

it carefully repaired, paid out his two dollars, went back and began work.

"Mother! *Mother!*" Ruth cried, hurrying in as he appeared. "Look out; look out!"

Mary hastened to the window. "Is it a fire?" she asked.

When she saw what it was she only smiled. To Ruth's amazement she did not seem to be so very much surprised; she only looked extremely proud and happy, and, as Dave glanced toward her, he caught something of the look. He grinned at her and winked.

"We give three kinds of shaves in this shop," he declared, "close, medium and light. These grass-whiskers get the first one on the list. Ruth, hitch the hose up to the summer-shower connection and be ready to produce some agricultural bay-rum."

The next minute the lawn-mower's whirr burst rudely on the startled silence. David Sneed had gone to work.

Ten minutes later he came in, adrip. "Say, Ma; look at here," said he, not in complaint, nor pride, but merely as a man exhibiting strange things.

She raised her eyes.

"Pipe how I'm leaking'," he suggested. "Watch my eyebrows ooze."

"Don't work too hard, David," she said, smiling, but still worrying, a little, over the really extraordinary perspiration into which the boy had fallen.

"I'm the best thing I *can* work, I guess, Ma," he said gravely. "I been tryin', I see, now, to work th'

other feller always. What I was goin' to say is that this gaudy percale shirt ain't modelled to set good on no such fit of energy as has hit me. Where's that flannel one I had to march in durin' the campaign? Remember? The blue one with the big white 'D' on it. 'D' used to stand for 'Democrat,' when I wore that, but now it's going to stand for 'Dave the Dub.' Maybe, in a week or two, I'll let you rip it off. But I got to get that shirt on quick. It will absorb the sweat. If I don't get somethin' that'll soak it up it will go hard with me. I'll drown in it."

That evening all were there, at home. Dave was quite too tired to go downtown to play pool; Madeline would not go out, and John Sneed, paralyzed into inaction by the exhibition of his son's new energy, revealed when he came home that afternoon by the smooth lawn, remained seated in a daze of contemplation of him.

"What's *hit* you, Dave?" he asked, bewildered.

"A fierce un-paralytic stroke," said Dave, and grinned. "When I've had three of 'em I'll be alive. I've been a dead one and not known it."

"Got the evening paper?" asked his father, shaking his head hopelessly.

"Yes; and ain't looked at the sporting-colyums," Dave replied.

"Did Oxheart Second win——"

"Pa," said Dave, with a new look on his face, "I'm damned if I know," and strolled to the porch to oil up the lawn-mower.

Indeed, for the following three days, Dave worked

about the place without remission. On the morning of the fourth day he came in to rest, and, borrowing a pair of scissors, began to rip the white "D" off the shirt.

"It's a two to one shot, Ma," he said, with no abatement of the grin which seemed to be perpetual upon his face, just now, happily replacing the old, sodden scowl which had so often marred it, "that I've outgrown this 'D'. If there wasn't no 'i-n' on in-dustry it would fit me, but I can't think of any busy word that really starts with 'd'. I've got busy, Ma. I've got so busy I can't see myself for dust. And I'm goin' to travel right along in that blue haze for quite some little time. It's goin' to get hazier till I duck so's to dodge the wire."

She smiled happily at him and helped him rip the "D" from the damp flannel shirt. He had to lay a pipe down, not a cigarette, as he held the cloth taut for her. It hurt his hands to straighten them for this small task.

"Holy smoke!" said he, in contemplation of them. "This lawn-mowing gag puts the blisters on your hands to beat the band." Having finished with the holding of the cloth he examined his palms tenderly. "But I've cleaned up three acres of grass in the last three days, which ain't so rotten, considering that I never shaved a front yard before in all my life." He looked wistfully out of the window. These days, when he was at home so much more than he had been in the past, he missed his dog even more than he had before. "Roosevelt won't know the place," he said,

wistfully. The pup's continued absence was a real grief to him. He began to cut the fingers from an old pair of gloves with really more energy than the task demanded.

His mother looked at him with infinite satisfaction. "I'm so glad, David, that you are not disappointed in your work. I didn't believe you would stick to it when you began."

Ruth, who sat upon the floor beside him, cutting dolls out of old race-track dope, looked up. "I thought he would quit the first day."

He smiled down at her. "Me, too, Ruth. I wasn't stuck on the idea, myself. But I had to begin some time." His smile changed to a grin. "Keep your eye on Dave, the grass-chopping king, and you'll see the Sneed homestead begin to look like white-folks lived here." He picked up his pipe, which he had laid upon the table while he held the shirt, and lighted it.

"Why do you smoke a pipe now, Dave? Don't it burn your tongue?"

"Oh, I've cut the cigarettes out, kid. They wasn't doin' me no good. Steve Weldon said I was a fiend and couldn't stop if I wanted to." He smiled proudly. "Did I fool him? Well, I guess. Quit right then and there. Chopped 'em out for good."

His mother, the brief work on the damp shirt completed, had turned from it to the Bible, which she had been reading, in a lull of household tasks, when he came for her help. She looked up from it, now, put it on the table, and again took her work-basket, over-

hauling its assorted contents. "I am very proud of you, David!"

"Oh, you needn't be, Ma," he replied, a bit shame-facedly. "It's nothing to brag about. I've quit, that's all."

"Maybe, some day," Ruth suggested, with sarcastic hopefulness, "you'll be old enough to smoke cigars. That will be expensive, won't it?"

He did not growl at her, but grinned, instead.

"Say, Dave," she went on quickly, anxious to offset the sting in her first speech, "it was awfully good of you to give me all the dope-clippings to cut up into doll-clothes." She rose, impulsively, and kissed him—kissed him twice because he did not dodge the first one.

"Oh, I've quit clippin' dope-sheets, too. Nothin' into it. Spend a lot of valuable time readin' the race-track stuff, when I could be doin' somethin' worth while 'round the yard."

Ruth looked at him in speechless wonder.

His mother fished out of the knitted medley in her basket a plaid sock and slipped her darning-ball into it. She threaded, then, her needle with black worsted, and began repairing a large vacant area through which the darning-ball glowed yellow.

"Here, Ma," Dave exclaimed. "Nix on the darning game." He took the sock out of her hand. "Don't throw away no work on them loud togs. No more of my money goes in that direction. Me for the simple socks, the kind that last."

"But, David," she protested, "you haven't any

others, just now. I'll *have* to darn them." Gently she recovered the lost sock, looking at him in bewilderment above her glasses.

He would have protested, but they were interrupted by a near dog's barking. Dave cocked his ear with eager, hopeful attention; Ruth sprang up in excitement.

"Did you hear that, Dave?" she exclaimed, between barks, as she listened.

But he had turned back to his contemplation of the socks. "Hear what?"

"I thought I heard Roosevelt bark. Listen!"

He shook his head. "Sit down. Sit down. I heard that, too. It wasn't Roosevelt. He don't bark that way. Roosevelt is an alto. That was a soprano."

Ruth sank back, disconsolate, with a sympathetic glance at him. "Oh, Dave, I'm so sorry! Do you think he'll ever come home?"

"Say, kid," he answered, "if you've got any loose coin get it down on Roosevelt's coming home, if he's alive." He rose. "Say, Mother."

"Yes, David."

"Take one more shot at those socks and then chuck the whole shootin'-match away." He hesitated ere he sprang the great news on her, for it would be, he knew, epoch-making in the family. She looked up inquiringly. "I'm going to work, Monday," he said, observing that he had her full attention, "for Abe Cohen in the Gent's Outfitters Emporium and Hardware Store, at ten a week. He's been after me to come in behind the counter for nearly a year." He

paused, half ashamed and half exultant. "And I took him up last night."

A splendid light began to glow in Mary Sneed's fine, weary eyes. They seemed to lose a large part of their weariness. "Did you, David?" Her whole face lighted with the pride that surged in her. "I am very happy to hear it. I knew you had it in you and that at the right time it would show itself."

Ruth was as much impressed as she was. She stood at a little distance eying Dave with eyes in which a wondering admiration burned.

"Well, that's me," said he. "I'll put the yard in shape, and Monday, at eight a. m., I'll be on the job downtown with the big smile, lookin' pleasant behind the counter, doin' my duty. And I'm there with the hot air when the farmers come in to flash the mazuma. Been gettin' up every mornin' this week at seven o'clock so as to get used to it." He took a pace or two away, then turned and looked at her without a grin, but very earnestly. "I'm sick of bein' a bum."

"And you will get ten dollars a week! David! Oh, I am so proud of you!"

"So am I, David," Ruth chimed in. "What will papa say?"

There was scorn in David's answer. "Oh, he'll give me the horse-laugh, I suppose." But even this, evidently, did not at all dismay him. It plainly was a new Dave Sneed who stood there. "And say, Ma, half of that ten-spot comes to you, every week."

Very little had been said between them, since they had reached home, about the horrid things which they

had learned at Springfield. Most of the time they had no opportunity to talk, for Madeline was seldom absent from her mother's side; but now she was asleep, upstairs, and he could not forego a question. For days he had watched, every day, his father's face for signs that he suspected, but he was not certain and he wished to know.

"Does Dad know about——" he began and stopped, knowing his mother would understand what he referred to, and unwilling to speak more distinctly before Ruth.

"Not yet," said Mrs. Sneed; then, with a quick glance at Ruth: "Ruth, you run out in the yard and cut your dolls. You make too much litter here."

"All right, mother," said the child. She was in a cheerful, helpful mood, as children are, sometimes. And she regarded Dave, too, with much favor. "Thanks again for this dope, Dave."

"All right," he said, smiling. "I had you in mind when I collected it."

"You—fibber!" she said, playfully, and took it out with her.

"Are you going to tell him?" Dave asked, thoughtfully.

"Some time, David; when it seems best."

"What does he think she's doing here?"

She ran her fingers through the basket automatically. "Visiting. Just takes it for granted." She turned sad, confident eyes upon her son. "I look to you, David, for strength."

It thrilled him wonderfully; it gave him almost as

fine a feeling of maturity and power as he had found in his decision to accept the job at Cohen's store.

"I hardly know what he will do when it dawns on him," she continued.

"Well, what can he do? He'll have to take his medicine, like you and me did."

She shook her head in doubt. The dreadful vision of old man Logan, the dreadful memory of all the details of that tragedy, were often with her, these days. "Perhaps. God grant that he will!"

"Do you know where he went to right after supper?"

"No; where?"

"Down in front of the postoffice. Some kind of a patent medicine show there. They've got one of those all star cornet bunches. Of course they're on the fritz, but since that trip to Springfield, Dad would rather hear a band play than anything else."

His mother nervously laid down her work. Her face paled at the mere thought of a showman. "I hope they won't parade, David."

"Not those mugs," he said, reassuringly. "They get the Rube suckers around the band-wagon and sell 'em Oleum de Gargalum at one buck the ounce. The dubs that bite think the dope will cure rheumatism, paint fences and black stoves. Say, chumps are born in Massachusetts like shad-roe!"

She looked nervously out of the window. "The people seem to like it. Everyone in town is going down there."

"There's only one guy in the layout who's got the

punch," said her wise son. "He recites a piece that he calls, 'A Few Kind Words About the Dog.' Say, he's immense. Almost worth your going down to hear."

"Oh, I couldn't!" She shuddered at the thought of it.

"It's great. I've heard it four times, already."

Ruth had returned and now was greatly interested. "What's it like, Dave? Can you recite it?"

"*Can* I? In a minute. I know it by heart. Want to hear it?"

"Oh, yes; yes. Will you do it, Dave?"

"Want to hear it, mother? It'll bring tears to your eyes. A senator, named Vest, from Missouri, handed it out to a jury when he was the lawyer for a man whose dog was shot by a slob."

She dropped her work and leaned back in her chair. "Well, I don't want to cry, David, but I'd like to hear it."

"I do, Dave," said Ruth. "Gee, I *love* to cry."

"Well, get out your sob rag. For here goes."

Upon so true a dog-lover as Dave Sneed the wonderful oration had made a deep impression. He had not only caught the words, but caught the manner of the professional who had recited them, and he knew their meaning, as none but a dog-lover could. He gave them, therefore, with some power, first striking an attitude, as though he were addressing a jury, and coughing once or twice, to kill the bashfulness which rose in him, even when he stood before this very sympathetic and tolerant audience of two.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he began, and Ruth snickered. Her mother laid a hand upon her shoulder. Dave frowned at her. "The best friend a man has in this world may turn against him and become his enemy. The son or daughter that he has reared with loving care may prove ungrateful. Those who are nearest and dearest to us, those whom we trust with our happiness and our good name, may become traitors to their faith. The money that a man has he may lose. It flies away from him, perhaps, when he needs it most. A man's reputation may be sacrificed in a moment of ill-considered action. The people who are prone to fall on their knees to do us honor when success is with us, may be the first to throw the stone of malice when failure settles its cloud upon our heads. The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have, in this selfish world, the one who never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog."

Dave looked at Ruth who sat, spellbound, and her face gave him courage. He coughed again, and took a fresh pose carefully. "Guess I'm there, ain't I?"

"It's fine David," said his mother.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he continued, "a man's dog stands by him in prosperity and in poverty, in health and in sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground, where the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely if only he may be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer, he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards

the sleep of his pauper master as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert, he remains. When riches take wings and reputation falls to pieces, he is constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens."

Dave paused again, looking at his mother. "That Senator Vest is a bear, isn't he?" He grinned. His mother did not smile; instead she touched her handkerchief to her eyes.

"If fortune drives the master forth, an outcast in the world," the boy went on, "friendless and hopeless, the faithful dog asks no higher privilege than that of accompanying him to guard him against danger, to fight against his enemies; and when the last scene of all comes, and death takes his master in its embrace and his body is laid away in the cold ground, no matter if all other friends pursue their way, there, by his graveside, will the noble dog be found, his head between his paws, his eyes sad, but open in alert watchfulness, faithful and true, even unto death."

His voice broke, at the last and he raised his arm, wiping his moist eyes upon his sleeve.

"It is very beautiful," his mother praised.

"Greatest speech ever wrote," he said, emphatically. Then he turned to Ruth. "How about it, kid?"

"It's just like heaven. What did the gentlemen of the jury say?"

"*Guilty!*" said Dave, impressively, "and five hundred plunks for the gent that owned the dog."

"I'm going outside and cry again," said Ruth, keeping back with difficulty the sobs rising from her sus-

ceptible little heart. "Here's the evening paper, Dave. I brought it in and forgot to give it to you."

"I don't want it," he said, nonchalantly.

She was astonished. "Ain't you never going to read the paper again?"

"No. What's the use? Don't care any more about the race-track and sporting news. I've—cut—it—out, kid."

She picked the paper up, unfolding it. "Well, perhaps there's something else besides that."

"Aw, I don't know," he said, uninterested. "What's the use?" He did not take the paper.

"Here it is, anyhow," said she, and spread it out beside him.

"Thank you, Ruth," her mother said, and smiled at her. "Run along and play, now. That's a good girl. Don't stay out late."

"All right, mother. Good-bye, Dave. I'll go and find Madeline."

After she had gone Dave picked the paper up, mechanically, but, true to his resolution, did not turn to the sporting news. Instead, puffing his pipe slowly, he scanned the first page only. It did not interest him, deeply. He had never given much attention to the affairs of the great world, and did not, as so many do, feel personally concerned in others' accidents, lawsuits and scandals. Suddenly, however, as his mother watched him in occasional side-glances, he bent above the paper most attentively. Something attracted and demanded his entire attention. Mechanically he took his pipe down from his lips and set it

on the table. As mechanically he smoothed the printed sheet out on his knee, shifted his position so as to get a better light and read, read, read, without once looking up. Presently he half rose from his seat, clutching the paper in fierce fingers which crumpled it into a wrinkled roll in his clenched hand. There was something frantic in his movement, and as Mary, her attention drawn completely, now, looked at him in amazement, she saw that there was something frantic, also, in the expression of his face.

"A-h-h!" he breathed. "A-h-h!" Without explanation he brought his fist down on the table with a smash which made the lamp and knick-knacks on it jump. "*Damn him! He's got his! He's—got—his!*"

His mother was alarmed. "What's the matter, David?"

"It's come, Ma!" he exclaimed. "It's come! He got it good. Here it is, in the paper. On the front page. . . . The skunk!"

He rose, towering over her, and looked into her face with head protruded from a rigid neck and eyes aflame with righteous satisfaction.

"It landed on him, down by Bridgeport. He got the crimp put into him right."

She was almost overcome by his amazing manner; she did not understand his words at all. She could see that something of terrific moment had occurred; something had transformed him from the calm and placid Dave, of whom, with his new viewpoint and

sudden energy and industry, she had begun to hope so much, into something kin to wild beasts.

"But what is it, David? Tell me, tell me; what is it?"

As she spoke his elder sister entered. She had not, since her return, spent much time by the family lamp, of evenings, with the others. The burden of her shame lay heavy on her, and, although her mother urged against it, she brooded through the greater portion of her days, alone, in her small bedroom. She saw, instantly, as she advanced, that something most unusual had happened, and came forward hesitantly, wondering, perhaps worrying a little. Neither of the others noticed her advance.

"What is it, David?" his mother asked, insistently.

He leaned across the table and smashed the paper down in front of her. "What is it? Look, look! Read it! Right there! See those beautiful headlines?" He thrust his finger on them as if they filled him with the wildest joy.

She shook her head and sank back in her chair. There was something in his manner which so frightened her that she could not look where he was pointing. "What?" she asked.

He read to her and there was a wolfish pleasure on his face. His teeth snapped as he finished every sentence. His hand trembled with the joy that thrilled him.

"'Local passenger train, number thirty-six, wrecked on Bridgeport Division,'" he declaimed. "'Day coach, carrying minstrel company . . . smashed!

Fifteen injured. Paul Churchill, a drum-major . . . killed. He was taken from the wreck unconscious, and died on the way to the hospital.' "

He leaned back in his chair, breathing very hard, his teeth clenched. "Killed! Killed! Killed! He's . . . dead!" Again he struck the table with his fist. "Dead!" He looked up at his mother and that wolfish glare which lit his eyes made her shrink, shivering. "Do you hear, Ma? He was taken from the wreck, down and out, and died on the way to the hospital."

Madeline, who had stood listening with horror-stricken face and widening eyes, unseen still, by either of them, shrank back toward the stair door.

"Who . . . was it, David?" asked his mother, dazed.

"C-h-u-r-c-h-i-l-l—the whelp that ruined——"

His mother placed her hand upon his lips. "Don't, David; don't."

"You had it right," he cried exultantly, "when you said that day: 'God will take care of him!' And now he's out of the way. God did——"

"S-s-s-s-sh!" his mother cautioned, anxiously. "*David*, you must *stop!* I don't *believe* God did it. Stop! Stop!"

"I do. . . . Now Madeline'll never hear of him again, thank God! He's dead, thank God; he's dead."

CHAPTER XXIV

MADELINE, clinging to the framework of the stair-door, swayed upon her feet. David, his excitement not abating in the least, stood by the lamp-lit table, his face working like that of a man who suffers agonies, his fingers tearing up the newspaper into small bits, his eyes fixed, staring into nothing. The few words she had caught and his demeanor terrified the girl.

"He's dead! . . . Dead!" he repeated. "And he'll go to hell! . . . He'll go to hell!"

His mother rose and stood regarding him with startled face, too horrified by his demeanor, for a moment, to say more. Madeline kept her fixed, staring eyes on him in uncomprehending terror.

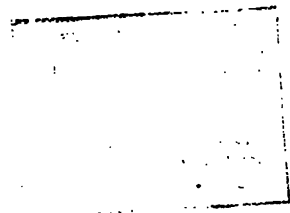
"He'll go to hell!" he cried, and hurled the paper to the floor. "It didn't take long, did it?" he exulted. "He got it quick! . . . And now Madeline's rid of him, we're rid of him and the world's rid of him. . . . And I'm damned glad of it!" He paused, and then, with an extraordinary, dreadful smile upon his face, looked upward, with: "Thank you, God!"

Madeline was fascinated. She but very dimly understood, or not at all; the thing which most impressed her was the spectacle her brother was presenting—a spectacle the like of which her eyes had



"HE'S DEAD! * * * DEAD!" HE REPEATED. "AND HE'LL GO TO HELL! * * *
HE'LL GO TO HELL!"

SECRET



never looked upon before. She took a step toward him, still unseen by them both.

"David, you mustn't," said his mother. "You shall not say such things! It is unchristian. It is sacrilegious. Be merciful, be tolerant, be just."

He made a gesture with his hands and arms which cast the entire matter from him to the winds of heaven. "I'm through," he cried, "and so is he! . . . If I hate him, I can't help it. He's paying for what he done to her . . . and he paid dear . . . but not too dear. . . . 'Died on the way to the hospital'," he quoted from the newspaper. "The whelp! He won't lead any more bands. He's all through."

"*David!*" said Madeline, going to him, her eyes wide with wonderment. "Mother! What is it?" she implored.

For the first time David realized her presence. He sprang toward her, with his arms open. "Madeline! Madeline!" he cried. "He's dead! Oh, sister, sister! God killed him . . . railroad wreck . . . smashed up! He's dead!" He threw his arms about her almost violently. "Now nobody will ever know. . . . You're home again . . . with me . . . with mother . . . with Dad! It's—all—right—now!"

"Oh, David! David! My boy! My boy!" his mother cried, imploringly, wondering if his mind had not become unbalanced.

He waved his hand at her in a wild gesture of primitive joy. "We've got her back, now! We've got her back, now! Nobody will know . . . nobody! Nobody!" He kissed his sister rapturously.

Understanding now, she resigned herself to his strong arms, finding in them a firm comfort which she had not thought them capable of offering.

"Here she is, mother!" he exclaimed exultantly. "We'll take care of her . . . you and me!"

Gently he gave her into Mary's opening embrace.

"Mother," said the girl, as soon as she could speak coherently, after the first shock of the news had passed, "father must know, now." The thought terrified her, though, and she considered it with ashen face. "What will he say? What will he do? Mother . . . tell me! What . . . will . . . he . . . do? I'm *afraid!* But . . . he . . . must . . . know."

"I'll tell him, Madeline," said David. "I'll tell him the whole thing." He had calmed now and stood there strong and finer than they ever in their lives had seen him. "Dad'll stand by you."

"No; I will tell him, David," said his mother. "You must leave it all to me."

"Well, I want to be there," he insisted.

"No, David," she said firmly. She looked at him with wonder as she thought of the wild ecstasy he had passed through. "You have had quite enough satisfaction for one day."

"I'll be glad the longest day I live," he granted. "Don't be afraid, Madeline. It will be all right. Mother will square it. And none of us will ever go back on you, or forget you—ever—ever." He kissed her on the cheek, and patted her upon the shoulder, comfortingly.

She threw her arms about his neck, a new sentiment

toward him born in her. "David! How good you are to me!"

"Never mind, Madeline. I'll stick, stick to you till the finish." He heard the gate click, and hurried to the window. "Oh, Ma, here comes Dad."

Madeline was terrified and fled to her. "Mother! What will he say? I can't look at him!"

Her mother put her arm around her and urged her gently toward the stairs. "Have no fear, my child," she told her, comfortingly. "I will tell him everything. God grant that he will be just. I have . . . prayed for strength to meet this hour. Wait. When I call you, come to me." She kissed her and then urged her through the door.

When she stepped out into the room again she had entirely recovered poise. She waited, unafraid, the coming of her husband.

As his father stepped upon the porch, Dave turned to her.

"We've got to win this fight, to-night, mother."

"God . . . is . . . my . . . refuge!" she said, slowly, and stood by the center-table with her hand upon the heavy Bible which was ever there save when it rested in her lap.

Ruth ran in in advance of Sneed, but her mother scarcely noticed her. When Sneed came in his eyes caught Dave's appearance first; the look on him of one who has worked hard all day. He nodded at him with approval, his cheery face and voice presenting almost startling contrast to the thoughts which stirred the two who waited for him. He had evidently heard,

downtown, that Dave had finally decided to accept a job and was pleased by it.

"You look like a candidate for county-clerk on the labor-ticket," he said to him. "Didn't think it was in you, Dave. 'We are the people!'"

He went to Mary, in his usual manner, spiced with pride in this new son, embraced her, and then took, with satisfaction, his accustomed seat.

"That's a rotten band downtown," he gossiped.

Neither had the courage, for a moment, to begin the tale which must be told.

"The leader had whiskers," he continued, inconsequentially. "Rheumatism, sciatica and lumbago are afflictions—but whiskers are a man's own fault." He looked up, smiling, at his wife. "Well, mother, seems like old times to have Madeline back with us." From his vest pocket he extracted a cigar. "Paul gave me a box of these cheroots. Only got four left. Not so bad." He lit a match and puffed. "Say, Dave, has Roosevelt come home, yet?"

"No."

"I'll bet you five to three he never shows up again."

Ruth, who had entered with him, urged against this reckless gamble. "Oh, Dad; don't you bet with Dave on that. He'll win, sure."

He reached for her and drew her to him, smiling. "Well, well! What are you touting about, Ruth?"

"Well, Daddy, I think Roosevelt . . . likes . . . Dave; and that it's what you call a *cinch* that he'll come back."

David, for the first time since his father had come

in, now found his tongue. "That's the dope, kid. You're on."

John looked wisely at him, quite unconscious of the tension he had broken in upon. "Looks that way to me, too. Thanks, Ruth. Dave, the bet's off."

Mary seated herself calmly by the table. The laughter of a crowd of children came in through the windows.

"Your friends are waiting for you, Ruth," she said. "You may go out and play a little longer if you want to."

"Oh, good for you. You're the best mother!"

"Don't go far away from the house; it's getting late."

The child scampered from the room, and David, very grave of face, but now entirely self-controlled, strolled to his mother's side and caressed her on the cheek. Then, still moving slowly, he went out of the house.

It was some time before the thoughtful, anxious woman began to speak. Then, with her knitting in her hands and the needles flying busily, she led up to the subject she must dwell upon. "It is good," she ventured, "to have Madeline back with us, isn't it?"

"Should say it was," he answered heartily. "These rapid-transit honeymoons are mighty tiresome. When does Paul's season close? Suppose he'll visit us when he is through. Probably bring another box of those cigars. That's one thing Paul taught me to do, right—smoke cigars." He chuckled. "Funny thing hap-

pened to-day. I had to laugh." He settled back, with crossed legs, in his chair, and puffed at his cigar.

"What was it?"

"Why, Steve Weldon came into my office and backed and filled like a schoolboy this morning. Told me he had something he wanted to say to me. 'Go ahead, Steve,' I said; but the chap couldn't get started."

Mary's attention now was caught and she looked at him searchingly.

"Of course I knew what was on his mind," said John, complacently, "so I just waited."

"And . . . ?"

"Well, all of a sudden he chucked his cheroot out of the window, and, leaning across my desk, blurted out: 'Can I ask Madeline to marry me?'" Sneed pushed back his chair and looked intently at his wife. "You can imagine how it hit me."

"What did you say?" she asked anxiously.

"Don't be in a rush," he cautioned, tantalizingly. "I didn't say a word. Just couldn't. Steve ain't much account, but then he's human and is entitled to common, decent treatment. All I could do was look at him in a more or less speechless way."

His wife was looking at him, spellbound. Had he told him Madeline was married? Had he, under pressure of these circumstances, said something which, now, after what had happened, would lead to revelation of the poor girl's miserable secret?

"And then," he went on, slowly, "before I could explain to him that she was, already, Mrs. Paul

Churchill, and that her husband was liable to drop into town 'most any time, he turns and bolts through the door."

"Then he doesn't know?"

"How could he? You wouldn't let me publish that wedding notice, and we haven't said anything about it to anyone. The whole town is in the dark."

"Better so," she said, with infinite relief.

It worried him; roused him a little. "Why? What do you mean by that?"

"He will not . . . return to us."

Now he really was excited. He leaned forward in his chair. "Who says so? Why won't he return?"

She did not answer, though he waited.

"Why won't he return?" he asked again. "She's his, isn't she? Answer me that. She's his?"

His wife reached out her hand and clasped his with it. "Madeline is not *his*. She is . . . ours."

Something in her face alarmed him, filled him with a terrible suspicion. He smashed his fist upon the table, after an instant of dazed silence. "What was she doing them two weeks she was away, then? By God, you'll tell me that!"

"She was dying of shame."

He was beside himself. "Is that why you brought her back from Springfield so hurriedly that afternoon?"

"That is why I brought you *all* back," she said calmly.

"Then," he said hoarsely, "there was no——"

"Madeline is still ours." Her voice was even, unexcited. "Just that, and nothing more."

He rose, half-frantic. "I'll drive her out! She shan't stay here another hour! This is no place for that kind of a woman. She . . . goes!"

"Then you will drive me with her," his wife answered resolutely. "John Sneed, we will go together." She rose, her lips firmly set and her eyes unwaveringly observing him. "The blow fell hardest *here*" (she struck her bosom), "upon *me*! The first shock was mine; the first ears to hear the truth were mine; the first heart made to bleed was mine." She paused an instant and then raised her hands to heaven. "The . . . first . . . forgiveness . . . was . . . mine!" She turned gravely, still unexcited, to him. "And you must forgive her. We must *all* forgive her. . . . I know it is much to ask, but I ask it. . . . Forgive! . . . Forgive!"

"And you can ask this thing of me?" His tone was that of one incredulous.

"I can. I do. I won't let her go. If she is to be an outcast I share the disgrace with her. You must stand by us both . . . or . . . neither. Choose." Her hands fell to her sides and she looked him squarely in the face.

Staggered, he turned away, his shoulders shaking from the grief which swept him. Mary, Spartan-like, stood motionless, awaiting his reply.

"Does her brother know?" John asked in a sadly broken voice?

"Everything."

"Well, what did he say? What did he say?"

"He wanted to kill him. He wanted to stain his hands with blood . . . But, thank God, he listened to my pleas, and now . . . Oh, how can I express my gratitude!"

John now spoke with a cold, cutting sarcasm, directed at his absent son. He had known it, and done nothing! "So Dave let him escape! My . . . boy . . . Dave . . . did not avenge his sister!"

Mary Sneed's whole figure seemed to grow; it was as if she actually achieved new stature. "But *my* boy, David, DID forgive his sister."

"Then it is the duty of her father," John Sneed, fiercely, and with a strong, fixed purpose on his face, exclaimed, "to take the case in his own hands. Churchill must answer to me." He looked around him hurriedly, and, when his eyes rested on his hat, lying where he had first dropped it, he pounced fiercely on it as if he meant, that very instant, to start out in pursuit of him. "The night he came, I went to sleep . . . asleep in this very chair." He laid his hand upon the chairback as if he actually hated it. "I could have saved her. . . . He lured her . . . he lied to her . . . he deceived her . . . and she followed him!"

"And I brought her back to you."

John's fury against Churchill grew. "*And he goes free, while the girl comes home, in her shame, to face——*"

His hat was crushed between his hands, as, with a crouching step, which she had never seen him use before, he actually started toward the door, as if he

started out, that instant, in the late darkness of the country village, to find Churchill—to search and find him at whatever cost of effort, ruthlessly, irrevocably to hunt him down. “I am going to find that man,” he cried, in a strange, hoarse voice, which, continually, he was forced to clear with little coughs. “I am going to find that man and do what her brother hadn’t the courage to do.” He looked about him, dazed, as if he searched for something, not quite knowing what—a weapon. “I am going . . . to . . . kill . . . him!”

His wife showed no excitement. “No, father,” she said calmly. “It is too late.”

“What?”

“He . . . is . . . dead.”

He turned to face her—whirled eagerly, a new light of satisfaction in his eyes—a light of satisfied blood-lust. “Dead? Then David did——”

“No,” her calm, even voice went on, “he died to-day in a railroad wreck.” As he stood, open-mouthed, regarding her, she sank wearily into a chair. “It is retribution.”

As he relaxed he seemed to lose vitality enormously, to literally shrink.

She held out her hand to him, noting with infinite sadness the terrific force with which the blow had fallen on him. He had aged ten years in the few moments of their talk. John Sneed, she saw, for the first time, was an old, old man. His plump cheeks had gone flabby; his hands trembled and his lips continually quivered; his wide shoulders narrowed as they drooped.



**"AND YOU WILL TAKE HER IN YOUR ARMS, TO YOUR HEART, AND HOLD HER
THERE? KEEP THE FAMILY TOGETHER!"**

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"Then he is out of my reach," he granted, weakly.

"Beyond human vengeance," she agreed. "He is in the presence of his God." For a time she let her eyes dwell fondly, questioningly upon his face, in silence, then nodded slowly toward the closed door through which Madeline had disappeared. "And she who is ours is there . . . waiting for your forgiveness." A long time she waited for some comment, that: "What shall I say for you? Will you speak to her?"

He did not answer, but, drawing his bandana from his pocket, pressed it to his eyes. His shaking shoulders, after he had turned away from her, informed her that he was weeping. She had never seen him weep before.

"Father!" she cried, distressed, and went to him, taking his hand and fondling it.

He turned, slowly, and, extending wide his arms, gathered her into them. "Mary, Mary," he said brokenly, "you are the heart of the family. . . . Send her to me. . . . I . . . forgive!"

She leaned back, as he held her, and looked searchingly into his eyes. "And you will take her in your arms, to your heart, and hold her there? Keep the family together?"

"Yes; yes."

"God bless you!"

Very gently she released herself from his encircling arms without a second's waiting she went across the room and to the stairway door. With slow, but quite unfaltering step, she climbed the stair, and there found

Madeline, dejected, wild-eyed, terrified, distraught, standing, dumb, before the entrance to the bedroom which she had slept in as a child, which, since Ruth had left her crib, she had shared with her little sister.

"Come, Madeline," she said gently.

Longing mingled with a dreadful fear on the girl's face. She hesitated; but, at length, yielded to the strong entreaty in her mother's eyes, giving her her hand, let her lead her down the stairs to where her father stood, his back turned toward the door by which they entered. Furtively the girl crept forward, almost fearfully she touched her father's hand, her mother standing, anxious, but yet confident, waiting for the verdict.

It came very quickly. John Sneed whirled and, with a stifled cry, clasped his daughter to his breast, the girl melting, comforted and reassured, into his enfolding arms. They stood thus as David entered. Mary held her arms out to him and he hurried to her, everything about him indicating a new strength, that wonderful, new found maturity of his. She almost swooned upon his breast.

"I knew Dad would stick, mother," he said softly, but exultantly, as his eyes wandered to where Sneed still held his daughter closely. He smoothed the weary woman's hair back from her forehead and impressed a gentle kiss on it. Then, still with that manly, strong maturity of gentleness, he led her to her chair and half supported her as she sank into it and bowed her head upon the table by the lamp and

Bible and work-basket. Slowly his father disengaged himself from Madeline. The storm of his emotion had begun to calm a little, and he felt strangely weak. As she went to the window which looked out upon the little church, he sank into a chair close by his wife, his handkerchief again pressed to his eyes. The blaring of the fakirs' band, downtown, came to them faintly. The old man weakly bowed his stricken head into his hands, covering his face with his red handkerchief.

Dave hitched his chair along, a bit, and put his arm upon his father's shoulder comfortingly. "It's all right, Dad," he said, in his new voice. "We'll take care of them. . . . Why, Dad, you're crying!"

"It's here, Dave," said his father, and pressed a hand upon his heart. "But I guess it will be all right. It . . . takes time, my boy; takes time."

Ruth appeared excitedly, her white dress silhouetted in the gloom of the open doorway. In her arms she held a little, yellow, struggling, eagerly whining, unkempt dog. She did not note the tenseness of the scene on which she was intruding, but rushed in, full of exultation.

"Oh, Dave, here's Roosevelt!" she exclaimed.

Everyone turned toward her. Her abrupt appearance was, undoubtedly, a real relief; her complete unconsciousness of the mighty tragedy which had involved them, an assistance.

With the dog in her arms, held firmly, although he struggled to reach Dave, she took her seat in an arm-

chair and made him, with a threatening finger, sit up erect upon her lap.

"Roosevelt, you runaway rascal," said the child, "you ought to be mighty glad to be home here, again, with the family."

THE END.

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